

A Fate in Eldrasa

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Prologue

Yio

The hall descended to a hush, and the guests rose and turned to the carpet laid down the centre of the seating. They were outside, on a beautiful day, in a beautiful garden, witnessing a once-in-a-lifetime event. The marriage of their queen, Summer, to a man who wasn't a man. He was human once, and then he was an undead ghoul. Now he was something more than most of the guests.

Yio wasn't like the majority. They were Fae, winged creatures born into a reincarnation cycle, powered by the magic that flowed through their veins. She was a Fate. A pink-haired, black-eyed humanoid creature that existed outside the normal flow events, influencing and guiding them towards peace.

She glared at the red thread tied to her wrist. She couldn't get rid of it, and most people couldn't see it. It tied her to the man waiting for his bride. Waiting for the one everyone was waiting to see. Made her heart feel for him, even when she didn't want to. He didn't care for her. Well, that wasn't fair. He invited her to the wedding. But he didn't love her. He never would.

He chose Summer.

The bride emerged, and Yio ground her teeth. She looked beautiful, every part queen and every part drop dead gorgeous. The dress flowed behind her, floating in a breeze that wasn't there. Her red locks were brushed into a side part, the hair trailing down to her knees. Her purple wings flashed as the dust on them glistened in the sunlight. It wasn't that Yio hated Summer. She didn't. In fact, she didn't care one way or the other about Summer, really. But she was jealous. She couldn't help but picture herself in the dress, walking up the aisle towards that bloody man.

Trei.

She turned to see him, failing to hide her wince at the awe written on his dumb face. For the most part he looked human. Apart from the eyes. They were the swirling endless depths of a Fate's

black eyes. The eyes of a kind man. A kind man who had killed without hesitation when the woman he cared about was put at risk. A kind man who had resurrected everyone he cared about. A man whose own belief could reshape reality.

He was utterly terrifying. And he utterly made her feel awkward and out of sorts.

This sucked.

Prologue

Kru

She belched loudly, waving the half-empty stein in the air, “I’ll have you know! I’ll... I’m Kru! I speak for the... Eh... Kruei! That’s right!”

The bartender rolled his eyes, his ears flattening against his head, “And I’ll tell you again, Fae. I ain’t giving you nothing without pay.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and then opened her hand with a puff of red dust, causing a dozen silver coins to fall from her hand and onto the bench top. The elf laughed and picked one up, “I can’t believe you can cast magic in your state. You sure you don’t just want a bed for the night?”

Kru glanced over her shoulder where the other customers were giving her a wide birth. They were whispering, but she didn’t know why. She was Fae, she had just as good hearing as any elf. They were talking about the wedding. Queen Summer and King Trei. Whoop-di-doo. Summer had banished her from reality, and Trei let her have exile instead. They’d both royally screwed up her life.

At least she was good at alchemical magic. Too bad that Elfin culture had pretty much rejected technology all together in favour of Gaian magic.

Kru burped again as he refilled her pitcher, “You should see me when I’m sober.”

The man rolled a coin through his knuckles, “So how long is this going to last?”

“It ain’t going to turn to dust.” Kru growled, annoyed at the implication, “That ain’t some cheap accident of magic. You rip the water from the air, and break it down. Take the smaller fragment, and slam a bunch of them together until the centre fuses the right number of times.”

The bartender blinked, “Wait. That’s fusion. That happens on a tiny scale, right? How many times do you need to do that to make a single coin?”

“Billions.” Kru said, beginning to sway on her chair, “It’s really not that hard. Pure materials are easy. It’s the hybrids that are hard. Like coal.”

The bartender glanced at his fireplace, “Coal’s hard? Huh. Who would have thought.”

“Silver is just silver.” Kru said, wiping her mouth, “Coal is charcoal, quicksilver, gingerbane and moon ore. Hard to get the balance right, and if you screw it up then it all just goes up in flames.”

The man nodded, “Huh. Who would have thought?”

Kru placed the empty pitcher on the table and sighed, beginning to feel the nausea. “I guess I’ll take the bed. And a bucket.”

The bartender thumbed to a hallway, “First on the left. She’s already set up for you. Two gold for the night.”

Kru stood up shakily, and fumbled as she tried the spell. A half dozen bent gold coins dropped from her palm to the bench top, and she stumbled off, ignoring the man trying to not get overpaid. She didn’t care. Precious metals weren’t precious to someone like her. Crystals and flammables were economy in her homeland. The stuff he wanted was stuff a Faeling could pull out of the air.

She opened the door, stumbling and falling to the ground. She kicked it closed, and glared at the bucket until it moved closer.

Prologue

Elin

Her roots quested down through the soil, entwining with Yggdrasil's. She joined the conversation, listening to the tree, both a part and the whole of the forest. Even here at the edge of the city that surrounded the central tree she could hear it's angst. The forest was unsettled. It wasn't clear to her what was upsetting it, only that something was coming. Something new.

Elin shivered as her roots returned from the soil and tapped a young tree gently. The roots pulled up out of the ground and she gestured meekly. The tree grumbled, but moved off deeper into the forest, away from the city. The youngsters always caused problems when things got out of hand. She shepherded them, moving them deeper into the forest, whilst the elders closed in at the front, closing off the hiking tracks and common paths that the Elfkind liked to use. Some would take the hint, the others she would remind in a less gentle manner.

She winced, pausing, feeling her scar burning. She raised up her wooden arm, looking at the cracks in her forearm. The burns were getting worse. It was a spell, cast against her by a young man, serving a very old witch. Together they had tried to eliminate her kind. She'd fled the mortal world then, and Yggdrasil had called to her. Had saved her.

She'd drank from the healing pools by the central tree, whilst Yggdrasil had hidden her from the elfin guardian. It was enough to keep her alive, for now. The spell continued to eat away at her. She couldn't reverse the damage it had done to her, all she could do was slow the progress of the disease. Her people were dead. All of them. It would not be long before she joined them. Only a few more months, but until then she would serve the forest that had welcomed her in.

Prologue

Kao

She glared at the Fae as he tried to sit, falling through her leg. She leaned over, and whispered in the irritating man's ear, "If you don't get off my leg, I'll eat you."

The Fae jumped looking at surprise at the slime left on him, and reseated himself nervously, whispering, "Sorry."

Kao ignored him, turning her attention back to the proceedings, or pretending to. She'd had to turn up. Trei had invited her, and he was a new god. Unbound by any treaty, and deciding to live as a limited physical form. In fact, choosing to live as nothing but a royal. It was embarrassing.

She raised up one of her transparent hands. Even this form was limiting to her despite it's ability to change into any size and shape she desired. Physicality had so many drawbacks over being a goddess unbound to any time and place.

The Fae who sat on her whispered to her sideways, "I'm Lord Finis. What's your name?"

She placed a wet hand on his shoulder, slowly engulfing and leaned over, savouring the moment of discomfort he was extruding as she soaked his suit, "My name is Kao."

The Fae stiffened in terror, and the grin stretched across her whole face. She hadn't seated herself near the front for several reasons. The first being she didn't want to be asleep in any of the official records. That would look badly on her legend as an unpredictable and all powerful wrathful goddess. But the second was this. That she would get an opportunity to completely mess with the mind of an innocent bystander. This lord had thought himself so uppity that he might be able to impress the stranger attending the royal wedding.

She leaned her head on his shoulder gently with a splash. One of her hairs stroked his cheek gently, and she whispered to him, "I wonder. What does a Fae's soul taste like? It's been so long since I ate anyone. Your arrogance is so... Delicious. I'd be delighted to be your entertainment for the evening."

The man shivered despite himself, not knowing how to turn down a goddess.

She grinned, about to drive another terror into his head when saw one of the people in the front row. She sat up slowly in surprise, "There's a Fate attending today?"

The lord breathed a sigh of relief, and began trying to scrub the slime from his suit in a dignified manner. He was mostly failing. "That's Lady Yio. Apparently she was involved in the war with the Arbiter."

Kao leaned her head on her hands, looking at the back of one of her old friends, "It wasn't really a war with the Arbiter. Janus was just an idiot who got himself killed. It was a war against... Well, you probably don't who Tyr was."

The lord glanced sideways at her, "You were involved?"

"Nope." Kao yawned, "By the way, those stains don't come out. Ever."

He sighed and gave up, and she grinned to herself. It was so easy to manipulate creatures like him, all desperate to have their self-value reflected by another. Any compliment could drive them to do incredibly stupid things. All it took to make them panic was a poke at their self worth. Introduce a doubt and the man would destroy himself. Embarrass himself. That'd be a fun way to ignore the incredibly boring ritual in front of her.

But she was worried.

She could see Yio. The way she held herself, as if she were on the verge of tears. The way she held her wrist, fighting the cord bound to it. Ah. A thread of fate. So she had imprinted on the man on the stage.

Kao raised an eyebrow. He wasn't that hot. Sort of... Average looking. The confidence was attractive, but for the most part it was his power that twisted the way people viewed him. He was barely keeping it in check, exuding an aura that blanked out everyone else's. He really was a powerful god. Kao smiled as she peeked inside his head. He had no idea. He was so innocent. Just desperately in love with the woman in front of him saying some boring vow.

An idea dawned on her, and she grinned.

Now that would be entertaining.

Prologue

Wintry

She shuffled around the bath-house, checking the temperature of the springs, checking the salts she had prepared. She'd probably done too much, she didn't have customers often. She'd left herself no work for the next few days.

Two small grey ears atop her head flattened as she realised she was just going to be alone in this empty house for the next week.

That was what she hated the most about this place. The loneliness.

She couldn't afford to be in a position where everyone knew her, or who she was. She couldn't afford to have friends, and she had no family left. This was one of the costs of her crimes. Crimes she could never forgive herself for.

She smiled softly, she'd accepted her punishment so easily. Too bad the other woman hadn't.

She was the real reason that Wintry was willing to endure the isolation. For a small moment, every few hundred years. A moment with someone who made her feel like she actually mattered. A moment with someone who didn't see the blood on her hands, just the smile on her face.

Wintry paused, choking.

Few hundred years.

It had been two hundred and twelve years, and seventy three days since she'd seen her last. She didn't know if they'd forgotten her. She never did. It wouldn't surprise her if they did. All she had was a hollow hope.

It's all she'd ever had.

Prologue

Alphege

The elf missed him.

That incredible man, that man she'd given everything for, without question. The promise of an elfin kiss. She'd wanted to take him home, to bring him to her world and show him that here, with her, he could find the peace he so desired.

It wasn't to be.

It was not her that he loved. It wasn't her that offered him what he wanted. He didn't get peace, in the end. He chose a queen. A woman who was part celestial. He became a god, leading the whole world into a new age.

Alphege smiled sadly. Trei just couldn't settle to do things by half, could he? He had to drag the entire world behind him, kicking and screaming, into a new age. The old hatreds would be forced to die. Old men and women would fight it, but they would lose. Hatred could not survive in a world where justice thrived. Hatred was a worm, hiding in the rotting fruit, as the new commander burned the forests to cleanse them.

Trei had died. He had become a ghoul. He was the definition of unacceptable, but now, he was the King of the Fae.

She wished he was her king.

Alphege felt her hands tensing up, grabbing the grass beneath her hands in angry handfuls. If Trei was here, if he cared to look towards her, she might be able to change things. To stop what was coming.

But she couldn't.

She wasn't the Guardian anymore. She no longer wielded Algar.

She knew what was happening, even if no one else did yet. She could feel it burning, forcing itself through and into her soul. Corrupting her.

This was the work of a man she'd thought long dead, slain by her own queen's hand.

She held up her dull brunette hair. This wasn't hers. Wasn't supposed to be. It had darkened when the lifestream had died, and been restored when Trei pulled her back to life, ignoring her fate. Yet now, again, her magic was leaving her. Stolen by her connection to Trei.

She was a danger to him now.

If the enemy succeeded in her corruption, then the enemy succeeded at being able to corrupt that amazing man.

There was only one answer.

She had to cut her ties to Trei. She had to break her imprint, that bound her soul to his.

She hadn't found a way to do that.

It left only one answer.

The elfin were eternal. They lived without dying. There was no new world waiting for them beyond death. In death, their souls were destroyed. It was the only answer left open to her. The only path to protect that which she loved.

And she would take it.

A Fate in Eldrasa

Yio

“What the hell?” Yio asked the air as she sat up slowly.

She’d fallen asleep on her couch at home, after thoroughly crying her eyes out. Sarin had been her usual jerk self. Told her to get over it. As if getting over a thread of fate wrapped around your soul was just something you could do. F’rir had been kinder, giving her a tray of cookies, but then she’d been called away to some problem in the Elf homeland. She hadn’t elaborated.

Now, Yio was lying on a rectangle of soft material, and there was a forest around her. Trees overhead, softly dripping magical dust of greens and blues. A magical forest. That wasn’t something Yio had seen in a long time. Most of them tended to be infested with either idiots trying to discover immortality through means that would nothing but corrupt the soul they were trying to preserve, or with elfkind. The snotty up-themselves people who all thought they were perfectly perfect and nobody else was. The kind of people who would execute you for having a birthmark. Though, F’rir had told her the lynch mobs were slowly becoming a thing of the past.

She rubbed the material between her fingers slowly. A kind of silk. It was warm enough to protect her from the ground, though it would be painful to clean. Whoever had done this hadn’t spared any expense. Which shouldn’t be that surprising - they had enough power to break in to the home of the Fates, and kidnap her without waking her. She briefly considered simply returning home. Forcing her attacker to show their face. However, it was a risk. She didn’t particularly feel like rearranging timelines after a fight. It’d be too easy for her to break things. And mortals loved to notice when their timelines showed simultaneously conflicting things. Editing until they didn’t notice was such a chore.

Yio stood up, stretching, pausing only to glare as the red thread around her wrist tugged gently in the breeze. It always did. Always reminded her that she belonged to a man who would not have her. Yio paused, touching her lips delicately. Well, he had given her that. A reward for everything she had done to make sure that he survived. That he triumphed against Tyr.

“Thinking about the boy?”

Yio startled at the sound, and turned slowly, glaring. She couldn’t see anyone. Nearby there was clearly a setup for someone to stay. Another silk blanket, this time suspended as a hammock. Above it lay a tarp for water-proofing, and beside the hammock was a bucket of water, probably for cleaning. There was also a travelling chest with an incredibly intricate lock on it.

Yet she couldn’t see who had spoken to her.

“Reveal yourself.” Yio demanded, flicking her hair, “I am a Fate. What puny creature has dared to summon me?”

The bucket of water tipped over, and the water seemed to move as a strange semi-solid. The slime twisted and curved, slowly growing and taking on a regal form. Slender legs lead to wide hips, before reverting to a frame impossible for most creatures. The hour-glass figure was ridiculous, and exaggeration of physical characteristics. The creature flicked a set of long transparent hairs behind her, revealing a face that Yio had prayed she would never see again.

“Oh.”

The goddess of chaos, the first goddess, the creator of reality itself. The woman held up two fingers and grinned at her, “Girls night out!”

Yio’s jaw dropped and she stared, “No. You did not kidnap me just to hang out.”

“Yeah.” Kao replied with a cheeky grin, “I pretty much did.”

“I’m leaving.”

Kao glared at her, bottom lip quivering, “But I went to so much effort!”

Yio raised an eyebrow, “For future reference, people ask.”

“I’m not people.” Kao stuck out her tongue, “I’m Kao.”

Yio rolled her eyes, “I know who you are. That’s why I’m leaving.”

“Don’t.” The goddess glowered and Yio felt the atmosphere instantly shift. The woman was no longer a playful youngster. She was the wrathful and unpredictable monster that had caused mortals to try and kill the gods in the first place.

Yio sighed and leaned against a tree, “What do you actually want, Kao?”

“This.” Kao yawned, flicking the thread floating in the air.

Yio yanked on her wrist, “Screw you. Don’t get involved.”

The watery goddess put a hand on her hip, “Respect, Yio. I’m willing to give you some leeway, in light of our friendship, but only so much. I’m not intending to play lovey dovey with you. I’m going to break the thread. Well, you and me. Together.”

Friendship? Kao had tortured her. Bullied her. Stalked her. That wasn’t a friend, that was a terrifying monster. And now she’d kidnapped her. Yet... She was the original goddess. Her power was very nearly without limits, though also without control. You couldn’t expect someone with that sort of impact to be able to understand relationships or even individuality. Kao was from before everything. Which meant she was also different than everything. Holding her to account simply wasn’t possible, because there was no one who was stronger than her.

Yio sighed, “How?”

The woman held up two fingers and grinned at her, “Girls night out!”

Yio turned and slammed her forehead into the tree, causing some birds overhead to scatter.

She felt a sticky and slimy and wet hand slap into her shoulder, “Come on, Yio. Give it a chance. Please.”

“Please don’t touch me.” Yio shivered, “Fine. I’ll give it a shot.”

“Yay!” Kao yelled and spun around in a dance whilst Yio looked in disgust at the stain across the shoulder of her dress. She dropped it to the ground, and flicked some of the slime off her.

“What?”

Yio looked over at where Kao had frozen, staring at her. The fate shrugged, “Something the problem, Kao?”

“You’re naked.”

She shrugged, “And? You got my dress dirty.”

The goddess laughed, “Seriously? It’s that easy to get under your skirt?”

Yio glared, “No. But I really don’t care about clothes.”

Kao touched her chin, “Huh... Well, I guess that’ll be fun. What do you want to do first?”

“Clean the dress.” Yio yawned, “Is there a town nearby? We could get my dress cleaned and pick up a few things. I assume it gets cold around here.”

Kao nodded, “Sure. I... Probably shouldn’t go, though. Eldrasians do kind of remember me from last time. It wasn’t good.”

“Oh.” Yio smiled, “So this is the elder wood. It has been a long time since I’ve been here. F’rir doesn’t like it when her sister interferes. Which way?”

“City is that way.” The goddess pointed, “About a half hour’s walk. Is that enough information?”

Yio nodded and vanished.

Kru

Kru swore as the light flowed across her face. She held her eyes, begging the pounding in her skull to subside, just a little. She was hungover. Which meant she got drunk last night. She couldn't remember it. Couldn't really remember much of anything from the past week.

She'd been exiled from the Evening Realms. She'd had the choice to stay with Ashwen, who was still bitter and angry off in her isolated little crap-hole. She didn't want that. She'd been the head of a noble household, and a member of the council. She wanted her life back. She wanted to prove that she could return to the Faen realms, to lead her people again. To lead the Kruei.

It wasn't working out that way.

She was banished, and it didn't look like there was any way that Summer would forgive her for her part in the rebellion.

So here she was, stuck in the elf world. Stuck with people who hated her. Hated her just for the wings on her back. Hated her for existing. She pushed herself out of the bed, spreading her wings and groaning as the light struck them. The dust crystallised and began falling, pushing the poison out of her system. Kru coughed into her hand wincing at the black mucus that clung to it. This was her punishment for drinking all night.

She shook it off, blasting it with a quick tendril of fire before it hit the ground.

The Fae looked down at the bed, and the clothes that had formed her cocoon. They were pretty worn out now, having literally been through a war. She pulled the silk shirt on, buttoning it clumsily as she ignored her headache trying to tell her to stop moving. She pulled on the canvas pants stiffly. They'd been great for under armour, but they weren't fantastic now. Elfkind was pretty. Everything they did was pretty. Kru didn't need to stick out more, and her lack of fashion pointed her out with a giant scream.

She flipped a gold coin as she pulled it out of the air. At least she wasn't poor in this world. The lack of trade between Alfheimr and the Evening Realms accounted for the differences in economy, made her able to buy things with stuff she found easy to make.

She exited the room slowly, moving towards the bar and ignoring the drunks passed out on the floor. She sat at the same stool she'd used every day for the past week, and dropped the coin on the bar top.

The man waved to her from the kitchen, "What will it be, today?"

Kru sighed, "Like I care."

The bartender shrugged and turned back to whatever he was cooking. She didn't care. What she wanted to eat wasn't possible. Whilst elfkind were vegetarian like the Faen, they also ate very different things. Kru adored flowers and nectar. The elfin seemed to like eating grass and roots, as if that was anything more than barely edible. It was kinda gross.

A plate of fried yams slid across the bar top and stopped in front of her.

Kru tried not to gag. She flicked a wrist, a silver fork appearing in her hand, and she placed a chunk of yam in her mouth. It exploded with a musty, earthy taste. Her nausea reared its head, reminding her she'd spent the night dousing herself with poison.

She rubbed her throat, "Got anything to drink?"

"Copper." The bartender replied, "But if you want something better, I did manage to get hold

of half a glass of nectar of some sort. Figured you might want to try it.”

Kru dropped a silver coin from between her fingers, “Try me.”

He pulled a container from beneath the bench top and emptied it into a glass and passed it to her, “Let me know how it is. Can’t have my guest going without.”

Kru sipped it. It was bitter, and old and had possibly even gone bad. All the same she breathed a sigh of relief. It was a poor substitute, but it still reminded her of home. The world that she’d left behind. The world she could never go back to.

“It’s kinda crap.” Kru stated and smiled, “Better than nothing. How’d you get it?”

“Passing mage.” The bartender yawned, “Apparently there’s a permanent portal opening in Calvenus.”

The realm of Madam Claven. That was surprising. She was a small-time Fae. Her people had never amounted to much, and she didn’t have much magic of her own. She was surprised that the council was allowing a trade route at all. The Fae had always been so isolationist. This had to be because of the new king. He wanted them to reach out. He was changing what it meant to be Fae.

Kru nodded quietly, trying not to show how angry she was. It wasn’t like anyone cared in the first place.

“What the hell?”

She looked at the bartender, who was looking passed her. She turned and groaned audibly as she saw someone looking around in mild confusion.

The bartender hit the tabletop, “Can I help you?”

The newcomer drifted over, “I was looking for a cleaner. My dress got stained.”

“You’re naked.” Kru growled, and the pink-haired woman glanced sideways at her, “And you’re a traitor. So maybe you should shut up.”

Kru felt as if she’d taken a punch to the face. She clenched her fists angrily, and the newcomer sighed, “Barkeep. Cleaner.”

The man glanced between them, and nodded slowly, “There’s one down the street. About three blocks south. I wouldn’t go outside like that.”

The woman rolled her eyes, “What? Your guardians going to arrest me over the embarrassment of seeing a woman’s breasts?”

“More what’s downstairs.” The man replied, “But yeah, they will.”

The woman grinned, flashing a dazzling smile, “I hope they try.”

The man went to say something, but Kru touched his hand, “Let it go. This is Yio.”

He went bright red and took a step backwards, bowing, “M’lady.”

Kru just rolled her eyes. The elfin worship of their creator, Lady F’rir, was embarrassing. They knew she was just a fate, not even a goddess, and they all just bowed down and scraped their chins on the ground for her.

Yio stretched briefly, showing off her rather attractive body, and then turned, pausing before she left and turning back, “Wait. What is a Faen traitor doing here?”

Kru glared at her, “Where else would I go, bitch?”

Yio shrugged, and left quietly.

Kru bit into her yam, hoping the taste would bring her back to the present. Try and forget that a storm had just walked in and out.

“What did she mean by ‘traitor’?”

Kru winced, “I’m exiled, elf. I followed the council when they rose up to try and depose Queen Summer. She won. We lost.”

The bartender shook his head, “I’m sorry, I’m sure there’s two sides to this... But when the palace hears about you, they aren’t going to be very happy you’re here.”

Kru shrugged, “I’m sure they already know. I met your guardian on the way in.”

He shrugged, spreading his hands, “I’m not having you stay another night. Sorry.”

“Figures.” She yawned, standing up and dropping a couple of silver pieces, “I’ll get out of your hair, then.”

She ignored his excuses as she head for the doorway. She didn’t much care. She’d expected this kind of thing. She was a political nightmare. Just another idiot walking through the forest waiting to be killed.

“That went badly.”

Kru looked sideways, seeing the naked Fate leaning against the side of the bar building in surprise. “I thought you were going to a cleaner.”

“I was.” Yio grinned, “But you distracted me. You are fascinating. How was it you always introduced yourself? I Kru, who speaks for the Kruei?”

She glared at the woman, her wings bristling behind her, “I want nothing to do with you, Fate.”

“Too bad.” Yio smiled, “I’m taking you shopping.”

Kru tried to punch her, swinging a fist around angrily. It seemed to stop midair, frozen. She couldn’t pull it back or push it forward. She couldn’t open her fist. The pink-haired she-devil in front of it smiled, “Well, you certainly do have a temper. That’ll be fun. You see, there’s someone who wants to hang out with me, and I really don’t want to. So you’re going to be our escort.”

Kru blew a strand of hair out of her eyes, “Who am I escorting?”

“Kao.”

Kru’s eyes went wide, “Fuck no.”

The pink haired woman grinned, “I already told you, I’m not giving you a choice. So, shall we get you a Farr dress? Or would you prefer to continue rocking the adventurer vibe?”

Elin

Elin walked through the forest quietly, listening to the hum of the trees. The panic of the trees. The further away from the city she got the louder it became. There was something in the depths of the forest that was off.

Something that did not belong.

She paused at the edge of clearing. She did not recall a clearing being here. No trees had died, fallen or been felled, to create it. Yet, the trees had recoiled and shifted to allow space for the clearing to exist. That was odd, and caused a spark of excitement to enter her mind. The only ones she knew of who could move trees were the shepherds of the forests, the Entrins. Her kind. The kind that had been wiped out.

Did another survive? Was another called by Yggdrasil?

She stepped hesitantly into the clearing, looking around curiously. She felt her hopes dashed. She could see camping equipment. Silks and cotton. Woven fabrics. Even a leather-bound trunk.

Something humanoid was here. What elf could be daft enough to camp this far into the forest? Elin had killed their kind in the past. She had made her presence known. No elf who ventured this deep ever returned. That was her promise to the rest of the world. Her promise to Yggdrasil to keep the roots safe.

She needed to find whatever had planted itself here, and uproot it.

“Oh, you’re a cute one.”

Elin creaked as her head spun around, looking at a being behind her. The being grinned at her. It was strange to see. A creature made entirely of water. It must be something like her, something with an affinity to nature. Called to serve the forest. She couldn’t raise anger at such a thing. Perhaps she should allow it to stay. At least, for a time. She would watch it.

The ground opened beneath her and Elin slipped away.

Kao

She followed the mess of roots as it vanished into the ground and raised her eyebrow. That was interesting. She hadn't met an Entrin in several hundred years, and not for lack of trying. Vastras and Azrael had both been extremely thorough in their elimination of the species, not just using combat, but viruses and inter-dimensional tracking had removed quite a number as well. Many bounty hunters had received crystals from the city of Calis as payment.

She could follow the creature as it shifted through the ground, following Yggdrasil's roots. It would be easy to go after it, encourage a conversation. It would be fascinating to see if the Entrin had any sense of self or sexuality. That would be an entertaining evening.

Kao sighed and turned her attention back to the camp. She couldn't forget why she was here. She was here to force Yio to move on, to forget about the little thread yanking on her wrist every time she woke up. Forgetting a romance that intense, and that unrequited, would take anybody considerable effort. It would take one who had never loved before a lot more.

She needed something big to get Yio to commit to what they were doing. Something to make her completely forget Trei even existed, even for a tiny moment of time.

Kao tapped her chin thinking, going over some of the philosophies that had been promoted by the various peoples over time.

There were two powerful quotes that came to mind.

The route to a woman's heart is through her stomach.

Hot pot boils with love.

She walked over and kicked open her chest with a touch, shuffling and sorting through a large number of containers. Some of them were cold, some were colder. She stretched towards the bottom, burying her arm up to her shoulder in the foot-high chest, just barely grasping a small metal container. She pulled it out victoriously, and placed it on the steel stand nearby.

She flipped open one of the wooden boxes, and paused, looking at the onions. She needed a way to cut them up. She sighed and stood over her travelling trunk, hooking her toes and the front of dove headfirst in. It had been a long time since she'd sorted it, or gone camping. A cutting board and knife. Where could it be? She descended, stretching, passed hundreds and hundreds of boxes, all of them sitting snugly against each other and the wall, held in place by a weak energetic field. It was a gift, from one of her students, in an age long forgotten.

He had some sort of long and uninteresting name for the box. Something to do with relativity.

She paused, looking sideways at the house, that was also lying on it's side. She couldn't really remember it, or where it had come from. But where there was a house, there was a kitchen. She swung over, grabbing the door handle and pulling it open. She concentrating, stretching her chest as well as she crawled along the wall of the house towards the kitchen. It was a boring house. Mostly wood. A few couches and a fireplace.

She snagged a cutting board from a drawer near the entry of the kitchen, and sighed as she saw the knife block along the far end of the wall. More stretching.

Wintry

She busied herself around the edge of the pool, swirling the current gently, keeping the fog at a level suitable for modesty, but not enough to prevent talk.

She listened as she worked to the Deacon.

The man in the water was boasting to the others, his servants, about an invitation he'd attended recently. Some sort of wedding between Fae factions.

"You should have seen it, Queen Summer, she really was something. But that dress was a little bit too pure, if you catch my drift."

What a disgusting creature.

Wintry considered briefly roasting him, but she got few enough guests as it was. She turned to head inside, when a wet hand caught her ankle, nearly toppling her forward.

"You're a different one, too, right?" The Deacon looked up at her, "There was a weird one at the wedding. All water and crap. She scared one of my friends. Threatened to eat him. Do you do that?"

Wintry glared down at him, "I am a carnivore, sir, but I have a more discerning taste than that."

Then she heard what he'd said.

"Water?" Wintry frowned, "Ah. The goddess. This must have been important to call her attention."

The Deacon frowned, "I ain't heard of no water elemental goddess."

She crouched by the pool, trying to ignore her nose. He seriously needed the bath. "Usually she has no form at all. In fact, form is something she finds quite distasteful. I would say, if your friend lives, he got off quite lucky."

The Deacon went white slowly, "Kao'el."

Wintry removed his hand from her ankle and stood, shrugging, "Be glad you didn't run into her."

Kyrus

The bartender shook his head quietly as he wiped the bar down, the rag in his hand moving with a quick and practised motion. This was his expertise, something he was comfortable with, something he knew he could do.

The Fae had admitted she was a traitor as easily as he cleaned the bar.

He wasn't sure what to feel about that. It might mean that she felt no regret for the actions she had taken. No repentance for the crimes she had committed against her own people. She might well be a monster who would do the same thing all over again, given the chance. Yet, that wasn't the impression of the Fae that he had. She was here, drinking away her days.

In the nights, sometimes he could hear her. Between the vomiting he heard the tears. The angry voices. This was a woman who hated who she was. Hated what she had done. This was someone who just wanted to die, but didn't have the courage to do it themselves. The Fae had chosen his bar. A place where mercenaries and brigands felt at home. Not just because he was willing to deal with her. Most elfin would turn their head at the kind of gold she produced so easily.

She'd chosen it for the customers. Because she thought they might put her out of her misery.

Kyrus wasn't certain if he'd stop anyone if they tried. She was, after all, a traitor. An oathbreaker. It was a crime that no elf could tolerate. Eventually, someone was going to kill her, just because she existed. It didn't help that she was also Fae. A race that looked down on all the rest because of their mastery of magic. It didn't matter that most elfin were their equals.

If he was honest, most elfin had similar views.

The Fae and the elfin weren't compatible. They hated each other, down to their very core.

A Fae being responsible for the poisoning of Yggdrasil, and the temporary destruction of the lifestream, didn't help the circumstances. His people wanted war. They wanted revenge. And here she was, waiting for them to kill her.

She was a traitor, so what did it matter?

Kyrus moved into his kitchen, where his face could be hidden as he worked. It mattered. It mattered to him more than he cared to admit. This Fae was so willing to admit to her crimes, so willing to pay the price.

A price that Kyrus had been hiding from for a hundred years.

He was a traitor, an oathbreaker.

That was his greatest shame, and even admitting it to himself was enough for him to be tempted to end his own life. He didn't know how she did it. She shouldn't be so ashamed of herself.

This Fae might well be the strongest person he'd ever encountered. She was true to herself. That was a rarity in all the worlds.

Yio

The elderly elf looked her up and down, “This store only deals with select clientele. Is there a particular event that you have been invited to?”

“Oh.” Yio shrugged, “Nothing much. A camping trip with the goddess of chaos.”

The elf raised an eyebrow and glanced between them, “A Fae has been invited to... What did you call her? The goddess of chaos?”

It was clear he didn’t believe it. And that he was rude and speciest.

She didn’t really like his tone, but he was the finest tailor, and in fact the reason for most visitors to the city. If she was being forced have a vacation by Kao, she was going to enjoy every stupid little tourist thing she could.

Yio snapped her fingers, another pink-haired woman appearing. The woman seemed surprised, and only half-dressed. That was unusual. She looked over at her sister, “So...”

“Yio!” F’rir snapped angrily, going red and trying to hold her shirt down, “Can’t I get in a bath without you doing something crazy?”

She shrugged sheepishly, “Sorry, your little imp here doesn’t believe that Kao is the crazy problem in my life.”

F’rir glared over at the elf the had caused her to get embarrassed and glared at him, “Farr.”

The man swallowed nervously and bowed, “Goddess.”

“Do what my sister wants. Whatever she wants.” F’rir glowered, and then turned back, “Satisfied? Can I get some damn privacy, now?”

Yio shrugged, “Sorry.”

F’rir vanished again, and Yio turned back to find the tailor on his knees, “The goddess called you sister.”

Yio checked her hair to make sure it was still pink, “Well yeah, I’m a fate. Didn’t you notice?”

The man shook his head, shaking.

She rolled her eyes, “Anyways. Kru here. Well, she’s still wearing part of her battle uniform. She needs something practical, but cute and sexy. Something that’ll do for a camping trip with Kao.”

Farr stood up nervously, grabbing a measuring cord, “Are you being literal, milady?”

“About Kao?” Yio asked, “Yeah. She’s actually in Eldrasa. Outside of town.”

The elf swallowed as he looped the cord around Kru, who instantly stood up rigidly. “The goddess of chaos has come to us. That is unfortunate.”

“For us.” Yio growled, “I’m the one who has to entertain her. Kru, lift your arms, let the man do his work?”

The Fae raised her arms imperceptibly, still obviously panicking about being touched by someone. Or rather, having herself measured by a man. That kind of modesty would be irresistible to Kao. Yio had chosen well to inflict this torture on her. Anything to distract Kao from herself.

Anything.

“What about yourself, milady?” Farr asked as he measured Kru’s burst, turning her face bright red, “I don’t believe nudity will be well suited to the forest. There are plenty of insects that wish to dine on you.”

Yio tapped her chin, “Yeah, I guess. I was just going to have my dress cleaned. But I wouldn’t mind a new one. . . Oh! I know, how about some underwear?”

The tailor bawked, “Excuse me?”

She grinned cheekily, “My sister did say anything I wanted.”

“I . . . Am not experienced with lingerie.” The man tried to force the point, but Yio was fairly intent on torturing Kru. And she couldn’t embarrass the Fae as easily if she couldn’t force her to wear some incredibly impractical and cute underwear.

“Who would you recommend?” Yio asked, “We are trying to impress a goddess, after all.”

Kru glared daggers at her and she wondered how long it would be before the traitorous scamp tried to kill her.

Kru

She couldn't help but twitch as she stood on the platform, trying to stay still and not get stuck by needles as the tailors moved around her, weaving some sort of silvery cloth around her. It might be beautiful, and in a better mood she might have appreciated it, but not after hearing what the Fate had in mind for the next shop to visit. The woman really was going to drag her into a lingerie shop. Embarrass her even more than she already was.

This wasn't just hazing.

This was proving that without a doubt that Kru belonged to the Fae, and she had no intention of that remaining true. She wasn't going to be manipulated or controlled by an irritating pink-haired freak just because of her past. And she really had no intention at all of camping out with Kao'el. Nobody would be crazy enough to get dragged along into that. She'd rather die.

"That can be arranged." Yio said in front of her, smiling sweetly.

Kru glared at her, "I am -"

"Kru, leader of the Kruei." Yio said with sarcastic drama, "Cruelly cast aside by the Fae, for doing nothing less than my duty. I was thrown down by Summer in all her infinite power, never given a chance to rise above! But I will! I will climb and I will become known as-"

"Shut up." Kru snapped, "You really think you can just make fun of me? And torture me? And I won't do anything about it!?"

Yio considered, "And... What could you do about it? Honestly?"

Kru snapped her fingers a fireball appearing above them easily and the tailors all pulled back suddenly. Yio yawned and the flames vanished. Kru snapped her fingers again and looked at her hand in surprise. There was no dust. She didn't have any... She fell onto her hands and knees, gagging and nearly vomiting. There was no dust at all. She was drained of magic. Dying.

Yio waved from where she was sitting on the other side of the room, "Let me know when you give up."

The arrogant creature.

Kru might not be the best Fae, she might even be the traitor that everyone thought she was. She might be as weak as Yio thought she was. Too weak to fight. Too weak to defend herself.

But she was still Fae.

She would give up when the sun burned out. Yio would have to kill her, hear and now. She would not accept it. Yio could kill her, separate her from the lifestream. Cause her to be eliminated from every timeline.

"Do it." Kru growled angrily, bleeding from her mouth.

The Fate looked at her, and for a moment she seemed impressed.

For a moment.

The pain increased and Kru collapsed fully to the ground, her vision faded as the white hot pressure flooded over her. She tried to curl into a ball, just curl and cry and die.

"That'd be disappointing."

Kru sat up. The pain was still there, but distant, in the background. As if it wasn't really happening to her. As if she was detached from herself.

She wasn't in the tailor shop anymore. She was somewhere else. She couldn't quite make it out, even though she could see it. She knew she was somewhere with form and substance, but she couldn't see it.

"You're not meant to be here yet." The male voice spoke again, "You'll see it when you're ready."

"Who are you?" She snapped angrily, "Show yourself."

The voice was pleasant, reassuring, but firm. "Like I said, you're not meant to be here yet. You'll know me when you get here. For now, don't you think it's time you got Yio to stop testing you? Prove you can be what she wants you to be?"

Kru stood up shakily, glaring around in the strange realm, "I don't want to be whatever she wants me to be."

"What she wants is for you to live." He replied calmly, as if the woman hadn't just tortured her to the brink of death, "Everything else will be up to you."

"I just want to be left alone!" Kru shouted angrily, hands shaking and wings hissing.

She blinked in surprise. She was back in the shop.

The pink-haired woman opposite her stood slowly, as if she'd seen something that had shocked her right to the core. "Okay."

Kru glared, "What?"

"I said, okay. Kru." Yio picked up her dress from the couch, and bowed to Farr and turned to leave, "You can have the dress if you want it. I'll leave you alone, now."

The Fae felt her wings rattling angrily as she watched the Fate leave.

After all that, and she just walked away?

And what the hell had that vision been? What was that voice? Why was it familiar?

Elin

Elin rested in the crook of a branch, her head in her hands as she watched the strange creature. She had thought it must fit into the world of nature, like herself, yet so far it was anything but. It had brought materials with it to create a meal, as if the forest was somehow unable to supply.

It made noise and danced whilst it cooked, like an elf. Or an elf child. The noises were nonsense, without discernible pattern. Just an expression the frantic thoughts of the mind of the creature, if it had a mind.

Elin was unconvinced that the creature was fully sentient. It seemed to lack basic self-awareness, or a sense of self-preservation. Without these it seemed unlikely that any sort of higher intelligence could manifest.

Perhaps it was an elemental creature of a kind. Something created by a massive discharge of magic, a side effect of a spell rebound or misguided experiment. The creature's form was certainly not one that could usually occur by itself in nature. It was neither solid nor liquid. Gelatinous, but as firm as the creature wished it to be, it seemed.

It appeared to know how to cook, and was preparing a crock pot full of wonderful smells. Roots and earthy vegetables joined the boiling pot slowly, after a knife flashed through them and turned them into slices. It was the practised hand on the blade that had caught Elin's attention. It wasn't simply an act of instinct, or even that of a chef. The practised motions were difficult to follow, but delivered with brutal strength. Not efficiency, but unyielding. It reminded her of the warrior elfin, the ones who cared up people who attempted to penetrate their defences.

This creature might be a weapon of war, repurposed as a housekeeper, of a kind. Though it was currently alone, it was clear it expected others to join it in the clearing. There were four hammocks strung up now, each in their own space, with a tarp overhead and beneath. She could not fathom the reason that creatures might be gathering in the forest, with the city so close.

She could only figure that it must be for a reason that the Eldrasians would reject, and thus, these figures must be a danger to her. She must wait until all were gathered, and then eliminate them before they could cause any further damage to her home, to Yggdrasil.

Elin patted the tree softly, as it groaned in the wind. The trees were nervous of the watery creature. Their usual straight-forward speech was drowned out by a frantic anxiety. The trees could not shift their focus from the newcomer. All they could do was whisper the same words over and over, the same expression of ideas. That the newcomer was dangerous, and that the world was changing.

It seemed odd to the Entrin that any one figure could have this effect on a forest so old and so knowledgeable. The clearest explanation was that the newcomer was known to the forest, and that the memories of Yggdrasil was what fuelled the fear.

Elin slipped quietly down the back of the young tree and onto the ground, beginning the walk towards Eldrassa's city. The clearest memories would be in the healing pools, by the exposed roots of the central tree. It was there that Yggdrasil could speak to her, and her to it. There she would be able to see what had occurred so long ago that the newcomer represented a threat.

She didn't like making this journey. It exposed her.

She could be captured, or killed.

The Entrins could die with her.

Yet, if this newcomer meant an oncoming storm, a period of destruction and change, then she needed to know. She needed to be prepared to defend her home. To defend the one who had saved her, the one she loved.

Kao

She frowned, looking at the pot and the steam starting to emerge beneath the rattling lid. If Yio didn't come back soon she'd have to let it cool, and reheat whenever the Fate finally turns up. This wasn't becoming the best start to such a difficult undertaking.

An impossible undertaking.

She knew what was at stake here, even if Yio did not. The Fate had an inkling of understanding. She peered through the mirror dimly at the world that was coming, this new world brought into being with wrath and fire. A world created by the deaths of so many. The Faen civilisation had already been rocked to its core. Their Arbiter was dead, the power balance that had kept them prosperous for so long was gone. They were being forced to rediscover themselves. Rediscover what it meant to be Fae.

Yio might not realise it yet. That a similar thing was already hitting the Fates. The three sisters had been untouchable for so long. All powerful for so long. That wasn't going to last. Not this time. The only one who hadn't been killed recently was Sarin, and though they were able to resurrect each other... Enemies now existed who could kill them all... And for the first time, those enemies knew they could kill the Fates. Knew they could hurt them.

Yio had a heart. She had fallen in love.

That had never happened to a Fate before. It had become an option. A weakness to exploit. Now the Fates could be manipulated. They could be seduced, and their hearts broken. They could be influenced to make mistakes that even they could not undue without breaking the treaties that bound the hands of all celestials.

The lesser species were beginning to wake up. To realise what the treaties meant.

This was a dangerous time, and an interesting time to be a celestial.

"I'm back."

Kao grinned, spinning around, jumping over the clearing and wrapping herself around the Fate in a cuddle. The woman glared down at her, her ribbed ears vibrating, "I just got clean."

The goddess shrugged and kissed her nose, "So? Dinner's ready."

She dropped onto the ground, and turned, letting Yio realise she hadn't been coated in slime this time as she walked back over to the cooking pot and lifted the lid, "I hope this is okay. Don't really remember what a Fate eats."

Yio pouted, leaning against a tree, "As a general rule, we don't."

Kao paused, looking from the cooking and up the Fate and back down, her watery eyes shining. The trick worked.

Yio blew her hair in frustration and sat down, a lounge appearing under her. She lay on her side and waved a fork, "So, tell me what we have."

The goddess grinned, her legs melting into a more comfortable position, "Beef stock, with stewed mushrooms and onions, to begin with. Then an assortment of root vegetables. Carrots, potatoes and the like. Finally..."

She placed a tray carefully next to the pot, "Beef. Finest quality a goddess can reasonably acquire in a world of vegetarians."

Yio laughed, "So... Average then."

Kao shrugged, picking up her own fork, and placing a half-dozen strips into the cooking pot, “Don’t really know. They were lightly cursed by the farmer I acquired them from.”

The fate smiled and stretched regally, filling a small bowl with liquid. “It smells nice, anyway.”

Kao looked around, “I half expected you to come back with the Fae. Did something happen?”

Yio shrugged, “I don’t know if Kru will be joining us at all. She has a few issues to work out, first. She wasn’t exactly happy to run into me. Too busy drinking herself to death, even with that nice elf trying to take care of her.”

The goddess slurped up her own bowlful, grinning with a face full of vegetables as they slowly dissolved, “Not bad. The elf? Oh. The bartender. Yes, he did seem a nice little soul, didn’t he? I wonder if he knew what he did by kicking her out.”

“She was a traitor.” Yio yawned, “That isn’t something she should have tried to hide, not in a nation where the greatest crime is oathbreaking. I don’t really know what to make of the Fae. She’s obviously sick. Trying to get herself killed. Her wings have no colour to them at all, and it looks like she’s trying not to use them.”

Kao paused, a mouthful of beef and let it sink into the bottom of her jaw, “That’s... Terrible. She hates who she is. Nothing good can come from that.”

“Maybe.” Yio shrugged, biting off some meat from her fork, “I’m not so sure. She’s changing. Kru was always an arrogant little twat. She even named her realm and people after herself. The Kruei of Kruin. They always a... Violent people. Quick to anger, slow to learn. However, Kru is learning. I was mean. I pushed her to the edge of death... She came back.”

Kao nodded slowly, “You introduced them.”

Yio smiled sheepishly, “I wanted to see what he would make of her.”

“And?”

“He sent her back.” Yio replied, “Sent her back demanding freedom.”

Kao grinned broadly, “Well. I guess there’s hope for little twat after all.”

Yio rolled her eyes.

The goddess let her chest slip down into the unformed mound that was her lower body some more, spreading out over the grass with a soft sigh. She looked at Yio carefully, at the string around her wrist. “Yio, can I ask you a question?”

The Fate glared, “Only if I don’t have to answer.”

Kao smiled briefly and then looked up at the trees above, painted red as the sun began to descend, “Do you think you can ever be happy? That a Fate has their own destiny? A happily ever after?”

Yio sighed, rolling over onto her back on the couch, “I don’t know, Kao. I don’t even know why I do half the things I do... I know things are changing. Becoming less certain. Who I am and what I am... Is changing. Becoming less... Clear. All the rules we thought were so clear and so obvious... I don’t know if they are anymore. I never thought I could fall in love. The number of people I’ve slept with... It’s always just been fun. A fun way to tease someone, a small pleasure every now and then. But it was never anything more than a nice meal or a hug from a friend. Never meant anything.”

Kao slipped into her bucket, becoming formless as she looked at the sky.

“He kissed me, you know.” Yio continued, “I . . . That took my breath away. I demanded a kiss for everything I’d done, and he actually did. A kiss is always something nice, unless they are a terrible kisser. . . But that was something else. I felt just like I do when I step outside of time. Like that moment lasted for eternity. I felt this physical shell go absolutely haywire. The hormones fell out of balance. The heart rate increased. And. . . Well. . . Sexual drive became fully engaged. Without him making a single sexual move on me. It wasn’t even a huge kiss. It was a moment.”

Kao laughed from inside her bucket, “How close to tearing off his clothes did you get?”

Yio made an irritated sound, and Kao heard her roll over. Apparently she’d said more than she’d meant to.

She had that effect on people.

“Talking helps, Yio.” She whispered, “What happens on camp, will stay on camp.”

A hammock swung gently as the Fate climbed into it, “Whatever.”

Kao sighed, “Oh, keep an eye out. We’re being watched by an Entrin.”

There was a pause, followed by a confused voice, “Entrin? I thought Vastras wiped those out.”

“It’s sick, but alive.” Kao replied, “I think Yggdrasil must have saved it.”

“Makes sense.” Yio said tightly, obviously still angry at her. “Is it going to kill me in my sleep?”

Kao sloshed, “I don’t know. Maybe. What do you want to do, tomorrow? Go for a walk?”

“Go home. Forget about this.”

Kao sighed heavily, “Yio. . .”

“Just shut up.” The Fate replied, “We can talk in the morning.”

Wintry

So Summer had married.

A human, no less. Well, the stories seemed conflicted on that. From what she could grasp, he wasn't human anymore. Some claimed he'd been raised from the dead. Others were suggesting that he had become a Fae. Neither seemed extremely likely.

Yet, he was certainly something dangerous. Something new.

He'd enraptured the hearts of Summer, Luna, Astrian, and Yio. That was a dangerous group of individuals. He was lucky he hadn't sparked a war between all of them. What kind of man could seduce a Fate? Yio might be known for her sexual appetites, but this man had caught her heart.

That didn't make any sense at all. In all of her long years, Wintry had never heard of a Fate ever falling in love, not even with themselves. They were beyond all that. They could not share in your life's experience, and so could not be with you. It is hard to love something that cannot surprise you. Can never bring joy to you.

Wintry looked at the moon shining down overhead. The light filling her with quiet hope.

If this man had managed to become something so strange, and so powerful, maybe there was hope for her. Maybe if he could find a way to be with a celestial, then it was an option open to her as well.

She'd given her heart and soul, already.

Unfortunately, all the other cared about was her body. Wintry bit her lip. She offered it freely. Anything. Just to touch the heart of the one she loved. Just to be with her, for a moment, amongst the storms of this world.

She would give it all just to know this man's secret. What kind of power did he possess? That he could erase the lines between mortal, eternal, and celestial?

Kyrus

He turned from serving drinks to some of the regular veterans, and blinked as he saw the Fae sitting on her bar stool, a newcomer sitting on his ass.

Kyrus walked over, picking up the elf and glaring at him until he went away.

The stool was the Fae's. Nobody had to enforce it. Nobody was dumb enough to get in her way.

True, Kyrus had turned her away. Sent her away.

Yet, it was different this time.

He heard the clink of a coin on the bar top, spinning around and around. It was silver, by the sounds of things. He poured the tankard of ale with an experienced hand, and passed it to her.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

He wasn't going to kick her out again, not after what she'd just been through. One of the regulars had let him know. A Fate had taken her to Farr. And there, they'd tried to kill her. Ripped the magic right out of her.

Kru had gone down bleeding, but she'd stood back up.

F'rir had obviously respected that, or Kru wouldn't be sitting here now. If a Fate didn't kill you, then they liked you. If they liked you, they had plans for you. Plans you probably wouldn't enjoy, but plans that interference with was far worse.

Kyrus' eyes flicked to the axe sitting on the wall above the bar. His axe. A warrior's weapon. As tall as a man, with a blade that weighed almost as much as an elf. He'd wielded it, because F'rir had willed him to. He'd killed. Orks, goblins, and elfin.

Because F'rir had wanted him to.

He looked away, pouring another round of drinks for a loud table, wondering if he could ever forgive himself. It wasn't like he'd had a choice. Nobody had.

Yet all the same, the crime was his.

"How much for the room?"

He paused besides the Fae, looking at her shaken features and shrugged, "Not like I've given it to anyone else just yet."

She nodded, turning back to her drink.

Kyrus moved away.

The exchange wasn't much. But they'd both said everything they had to.

Yio

She could hear Kao sleeping, a soft blubbering noise in the background, slowly driving her out of her mind. It didn't stop, not for a single moment. The frequency rose and fell, but it was always there.

Yio pulled the blanket over her head, grinding her teeth together. So this was what it was like to sleep near a slime. It was awful.

All she wanted to do was sleep, to forget everything that Kao had made her bring her up with her damn honesty field. The goddess twisted the universe around her, making it more chaotic. There's nothing more chaotic than total and brutal honesty. Just being near the woman made Yio have to be more honest with herself. To admit that what she was feeling wasn't about to go away.

To admit that she still loved Trei, even if he'd moved on.

He hadn't even spoken to her at the wedding.

All that man wanted, he already had. A life with Summer.

She wondered how the others were coping. The others forced to imprint on Trei simply because he existed. Luna had Claven to distract her, at least. The two of them had been all over each other, as if they'd just discovered sex. Claven had come out of her shell a bit since then. Become more assertive, more confident in herself. It made sense, the woman had been a nearly-magicless Fae. Now however she was the consort of the Crown Princess.

Astrian was a different story.

Yio pushed the blanket up with her knees and opened a small portal in the air, peeking in on the blonde bombshell. She was the one who'd made the biggest changes in her life, since that day. She hadn't even turned up to the wedding.

Yio smiled sadly at the Fae, who was sitting upright in her cocoon, cooing softly as she slept. The house was made of a brittle wood, and the bed was cheap straw. When Trei had resurrected her, Astrian had made a choice no one had quite expected. A choice to remain in the human world. She'd abandoned Summer, who she served for generations. Abandoned Trei, who she'd died for twice.

What happened to her had been messed up. Died and reborn as a child, but still imprinted on the man... And then she'd been straight up executed by the woman that Kru had served. Yio was certain that Astrian's death was one of the reasons that Trei and Summer were taking such a hardline stance against the traitors, rather than trying to reintegrate them into Faen society.

It was a mistake.

Yes they had rebelled, but to split the Fae in this way would destroy them and lead to the downfall of their culture. Civil war was an inevitability, even if Trei and Summer could bring devastating weaponry to the table. It didn't matter how many people died if you didn't feel free anymore. It didn't matter what species you were, human, elf, Fae... The right to govern yourself will always mean more than continuing to live.

Isolation, captivity, slavery. They weren't being alive. They were murdering someone and turning them into little more than ghouls.

Yio closed the portal, sighing. At least Astrian seemed happy. No night terrors, unlike Luna. Maybe Astrian really had come to terms with what had happened, and accepted what Summer and Trei were. She was simply staying away so that her own heart wouldn't continue to ache.

She could learn something from the Fae.

This getaway that Kao was taking her on, the whole point of it was to feel free. To feel as if she had a choice. To feel disconnected to the man that had abandoned her without a second thought. To forget the man she'd tried her best to impress, and failed.

She'd never been rejected before.

Yio knew she was intoxicating to most creatures. It didn't matter if they were a butterfly or an ork. She could seduce them with a smile and a touch. She'd melted the heart of Drak'tur, the warlock of Orkind. The man who had butchered entire races without a second thought, just to fuel his magic. All she'd had to do to turn the demigod of death into her play thing was a smile and flip of her hair. He'd bowed down and worshipped the ground she walked on.

None of that had worked on Trei.

He hadn't even noticed that she really did care about him, more than the stupid curse. The curse might have brought Trei to her attention, but she should have been able to break it. Yio had failed because... She loved him. He was kind, but brutal. He was generous. He didn't think of himself as an all-powerful god, even though he was. He chose friendship and love when so many people would have reached out to the universe and reshaped it in their own image. But Trei didn't care about power. He'd married a celestial, but that didn't matter to him. He'd never seen Summer that way. He just saw her as a beautiful and intelligent woman. A woman whose no-nonsense attitude had appealed to him. A woman who could make him laugh, or cry.

Yio felt a tear run down her cheek.

Why hadn't he been able to see that she could be that too? Why hadn't Trei been able to see that Yio was a woman? Not just a celestial. Not just an irritatingly powerful creature drifting in and out of his life, but someone who wanted to spend their eternal life with his.

She would have given it all up in a heartbeat, if it meant she could be with him.

A small sob escaped from Yio's chest.

She'd died for him. She'd let his girlfriend kill her, rip her soul to shreds, just to give Trei the knowledge he needed to survive it all. To save him. Yet, to Trei, all she was... She was just his torturer. Just another idiot who got in his way. She was just a monster, willing to do whatever it took to make sure everything played out the right way.

Trei had never given a damn about her.

Kru

She looked down into the tankard of ale, tears slowly peppering the liquid's surface.

Kru wished she could just forget. Just chug the ale and let it block out her memories. Let her forget who she was and the crap that was her life, but she couldn't. She couldn't forget what she had done. Couldn't forgive herself.

She'd just stood by when Ashwen killed a Faeling.

Kru hadn't even reacted when Ashwen had beheaded Astrian. She just suggested they continue the hunt in the mortal world. As if the child had been justly punished. As if anyone deserved death for defending their home from an invading army.

That's the reason she'd rejected Trei's offer of returning home, and making up for what she had done.

She didn't deserve to return home. What she deserved was death. She was just too much of a coward to up and kill herself. She'd sat here, plastered out of her brains, waiting and begging for the other customers to put her out of her misery. To remove her worthless stain from the pages of the Fae. She'd ruined the legacy of the Kruei. Her name wasn't a thing to be proud of anymore. She'd lead her people into a senseless and brutal war.

She'd turned them against their own queen.

She was a traitor. An oathbreaker. A liar and a cheat.

A murderer.

The tankard between her hands shattered, spraying ale across the bench top, and Kru's head dropped forward onto the bench with a solid thunk. She didn't care about the fragments digging into her forehead, or the stick substance now leaking off the bench top and over her. This was nothing more than her due.

Death itself had rejected her. Cast her out. She was nothing. A waste of time and space and matter. A waste of magic. She was precisely what an adventurer should seek out. The thing that should be killed and turned into something useful. She should be slain and skinned and hung up on some wall somewhere. The trophy hunter that had saved the world from the Fae that had threatened to destroy them all. The idiot who had nearly caused the entire world to slip into eternal darkness.

She was the legacy of Tyr.

She was the embodiment of those that the man had manipulated into doing his work for him. The people who had driven Summer mad. The people who had killed for him without ever realising he was pushing them along an enteral path of damnation and destruction.

Something sharp prodded her in the back, and Kru rolled her head sideways, looking up through tears at an angry elf, "We don't want your kind here, Fae. Move along."

She rolled her head back, ignoring him. Hoping he would take the hint and stab her. Kill her. Take her from this world of regret and pain.

Give her oblivion.

The knife pressed sharper, "Don't be ignoring me, mundane!"

An elfin curse word. Someone less than them. Less than elf, nothing more than human. Something pathetic to be kicked by the roadside as the traveller moves on. Something weak. Something disgusting. Something that didn't deserve the little time alive it had. A waste.

It suited her.

Kru gasped involuntarily as the knife penetrated between two of her ribs. She felt her cheek twitching as the white hot pain raged through her skull, screaming for her to defend herself. To wake up and fight. To survive.

“Really?”

Kru looked to her side. She was still in the bar, but now there was a figure leaning beside her. A figure she couldn’t make out. She couldn’t see him, even though he was right there beside her.

“You’re just going to give up, Kru? You’re going to let someone else decide your fate? Let someone else puppet you all over again?”

She ground her jaw, glaring at the half-shadow, “I am no one’s puppet.”

“Prove it.” He said quietly.

She glared to her side at the man ushering her towards death, and flashed her fangs at him. The man released his dagger stepping backwards in surprise, and Kru sat up, pulling the dagger out and dropping it onto the ground with a clatter.

She stood up shakily, feeling herself already beginning to bleed out, and then backhanded the elf. He was tossed backwards and into the wall with a sickening crack. She turned, looking at the crowd in the bar as the blood poured out of her side, running down her and spinning tendrils around her leg, running down the back of her knee and across her ankle onto the floor.

Kru clapped her hands together, and whispered to them.

A burst out of light shot from her hands, and she glared at the elfin folk watching her. Waiting for her to make the first move.

“Leave me alone.” She growled, and tossed the ball into the air.

There was a moment where all sound was blasted away, by something larger and more intense than what could be called sound. Kru blinked her eyes, trying to see passed the dots dancing in her vision. The customers were all gone. Every single one of them.

She turned back to the bar top, looking at the broken glass and the ale leaking everywhere. She picked a piece of glass out of her forehead and tossed it with the rest. She sighed and held her hand over the bar top, rattling as hundreds of coins dropped. She yawned, and touched her side gingerly, feeling the open wound. “Know a decent doctor?”

The bartender raised his head cautiously, still hiding behind the counter, “Any elf can heal. But not that. That’s too deep. You’d best head towards Yggdrasil.”

Kru shrugged, flinching as she cauterised the wound with a fireball, and then turned, waving as she left, “Sorry about the mess.”

She didn’t know what it was she wanted.

She didn’t know why she couldn’t just let herself die. What it was about the figure that brought out the anger in her, the will to survive. She couldn’t explain it, but when he told her to act, to prove herself... She felt like she had to prove she was worthy. Worthy of his attention.

It didn’t make any sense to her at all.

She smiled, flashing her fangs at the elfin who dared to look at her as she walked down the street, still bleeding. It felt good to be feared again, if only for a moment. The elfin thought they were above and beyond everything, just like the Fae. Everyone was a xenophobic idiot. Respect

didn't come from what race you happened to be born into. Respect was taken at the end of a sharp and pointy object. Respect was seized by bloody force.

Maybe she did deserve to be killed.

Maybe she was a murderer.

If that was what she was, then she may as well embrace it.

Elin

Elin relaxed into the water, letting the clear waters spin around her, swarming as the droplets move up her and over her, pulling her down into the pool. The roots beneath her reached up, wrapped around her and drawing her down into the depths of the water.

She groaned, bubbling, as her arm seemed to scream. The taint burned, boiling the water around it. She could feel the light and heat coming from the blistering wound, and she held up her hand, looking at the orange fire that laced within her, penetrating deep into her arm and laced throughout her body. The waters tried to chase out the curse, to follow it to the root cause, but there was none to be found.

She continued to fall, the light overhead fading, as she was dragged into the depths of the water. She'd never been pulled this deep before. Never been invited here by the tree's spirit. This was a sacred place. She was being pulled close to Yggdrasil, close to the heart of elfin magic. The entire world was alive from this one central core.

Elin felt herself twitching. It was too deep.

She could feel the pressure crashing in against her, trying to crush her fragile limbs. To pulverise her into sawdust. To take what had been a living tree and convert it to pulp.

She couldn't breathe anymore. There was too much water, she was drowning through her roots.

Maybe that was the point.

Had Yggdrasil decided to kill her? For her failure to remove the newcomers?

Was this her just punishment?

Darkness begin to close in around the edge of her vision, even in this lack of light she could feel it. Feel the darkness coming up and dragging her down, taking her world from her.

Elin gasped her last.

Kao

She could hear Yio crying, sobbing. The tears of someone stricken by grief.

There was no comfort for this sort of pain. No simple answers.

Yio didn't trust her enough to take any comfort in her presence or touch, and that meant there was nothing Kao could do. She wasn't used to feeling this helpless, this useless. Her best friend was hurting, wishing that she was dead rather than having a heart this broken, and there was nothing at all she could do to help.

The truth stung.

Yio really was her best friend in all the 'verses. The only one she could feel comfortable being herself, the only one where she didn't feel the incessant need to turn their mind inside out and devote their soul to insanity. Kao trusted Yio implicitly. She would tell her anything, everything. If a threat arose that could bring harm to the Fate, then Kao would put her eternity on the line to stop it. She would step up, without hesitation, to end it.

Yet, she knew the feeling wasn't mutual.

She doubted that Yio knew how much she meant to her. How much her tears hurt her.

Broke her own heart.

Kao felt the salt absorbing into her cheeks as she cried silently, listening to the Fate.

It wasn't fair.

She'd done everything she could to give Yio a fantastic day. A Fae to play with, a tailor to tease, and a fantastic meal... But at the end of the day all she'd done is hurt her. Made her remember she was incomplete, and would always be incomplete. Forced her to remember that a piece of her soul belonged to a man who didn't care about it at all.

Kao stood up with a splash, popping out of her bucket and into humanoid form. She kicked open her trunk and pulled something out of the top. Something she'd been planning to give her later, but she had to do something.

She stalked over to the hammock, where the Fate had frozen, hoping she would go away.

Kao shoved the small object under the blanket and under the arm of the Fae. She straightened haughtily and tucked the blanket tighter around the Fae and then walked back and collapsed into her bucket, hiding her face at the bottom of the pail where she immediately burst into tears. Silent and salty and enough to make her entire body shake.

Wintry

She sat up instantly, her ears twitching, listening.

All she could hear was the gentle background sounds of the forest, the stream and the springs. There was nothing amiss. Nothing that stood out.

Her heart did not quieten.

Something was wrong. Something was desperately wrong. Wintry felt as if the world was about to end. As if events had been set in motion, unstoppable events that would lead to utter destruction.

The last time she'd felt this, the world had ended. It had ended and been destroyed so badly even the gods couldn't stitch reality back together correctly. They'd left regions of impossibility and horror, unable to fill the gaps.

She didn't know what could be causing this.

It couldn't be this new stranger, Trei. If it had, then she would have felt this before his little civil war had happened.

It had to be something else.

Had the orks attacked Eldrasa again? Was she about to be swarmed by an invading army? Yet, the forest was quiet. There was no invading army. There were no giant portals being torn open in the sky.

She couldn't feel any magic. There was no wizard or mage summoning a world ending event.

Her ears flattened against her head. She couldn't tell what was wrong, only that it was.

That was worse.

Kyrus

The mop hit the ground with a wet smack.

He twirled it, pushing it back and forth, trying to work the grime from between the stones. Trying to pick up the blood of the Fae from where it had been spilled. Blood that had fallen because he'd just let things play out.

He shouldn't have.

Kyrus sighed as he squeezed the mop into the bucket, before it hit the stones again. He shouldn't have let the man hurt her. He knew that. He didn't want to be involved in this, any of it. Yet all the same. It wasn't right what he had done.

Those who refused to take action were every bit as guilty as those who took action.

This Fae, she'd upset his world. Forced him to remember what he had done. She was no worse than him. No worse than half the bastards that walked through his door. She carried violence in her wake, but they all did. It was what they were. When killing needed doing, this is where you came.

The jobs board on the wall was a permanent reminder of that.

Monsters, criminals, terrorists. They were what these people did. Death was what they dealt.

He might have tried to put that behind him, but it was what he was. An arbiter of death and destruction. He of all people should have known that the Fae wanted to die, and that she wouldn't stop the man for attacking. He should have stood up and made sure everyone knew she was off limits. Death wasn't what she deserved. Unlike the rest of them, she'd admitted her guilt.

She was paying for her crimes. Exiled to a world that hated her very existence.

Yggdrasil. The tree could heal, that was certain. However, it didn't heal everyone. The tree was picky. It only deigned to help a select few. The Guardian and her apprentices, the temple, the queen. Not much more than that. Every now and then it would choose to help another, and generally speaking that person became an icon. An avenger who rose above all others.

Kyrus had been brought to Yggdrasil once, a very long time ago. Dying, weak.

The tree had ignored him.

Kru was worse than he was then. She would die if the tree didn't intervene, heck, by the alarm bells in the city, she might die before she got there. But if the tree didn't reject her, then it meant that Eldrasa itself had accepted her.

If Yggdrasil accepted Kru, then Kyrus would.

He wouldn't have a choice.

He sighed, glancing over at his axe. If she came back, then he would protect her.

Protect her, even if it cost him everything. So many had died the last time he'd said those words to himself. Died in flame and anguish. Burning villages. Screaming children, voices cut off as his blade had moved in perfect efficiency. The smell of the ash, and burning bodies filled his nose. The sight of the children screaming for mercy.

He ended them quickly. That was the mercy he had brought.

Kyrus started, bringing himself back to the bar, as one of the veterans punched his shoulder, "Careful now. Memories are dangerous things."

He smiled briefly at the man, and poured him another drink. It was true. Most of the grizzled ones carried their own horrors in their wakes. Some of them carried the same sins as Kyrus.

That was the cost of war. Of fighting a war that had to be won, at any cost.

He would stand for Kru. She might be hurting, but she wasn't alone. She wasn't the only soldier who had fought the good war, and lost.

Yio

What the hell.

Kao had walked over, all pissed off that she couldn't sleep and shoved a stuffed toy into Yio's arms. It was actually quite cute, and certainly comforting. It was a plush of a small furry creature, with wide red eyes, and ears like her own. She didn't know who would have known a Fate long enough to create it. That was a part of the puzzle.

The other part was whether Kao was just trying to shut her up... Or if Kao just couldn't stand to hear her cry.

Was it possible the goddess was trying to be comforting? If she hadn't seemed so angry when she shoved it in Yio's arms, she would have assumed it was a thoughtful gift. It seemed like something that Kao would have had to have gone to a tailor for. A custom design. She doubted that there were many children out there with ribbed ears like a Fate.

In fact, only two people had ever shown the same physical aspects as any Fate. Tyr, and Trei.

She bit her lip, trying not to burst into tears again.

She missed him. Missed his blunt attitude, and willingness to always tell the truth. Trei didn't feel a need to lie. If he didn't want to tell you... He told you that. He was brutally honest. Usually at the worst of times. So willing to say the words that hurt. He hesitated of course, but he still said it. Still told her that he didn't love her. Just those words. No hints, or shielding. No attempt to soften the blow.

Yio had loved that. His honesty made him all the more attractive. It was a Fate trait. When you don't belong to any one place or timeline, you began to care less and less about the immediate impact of your words. If whoever you were talking to was overly sensitive, you could always step back and rearrange things to make them more receptive to the message.

What she missed most though, was Trei's insight.

He wouldn't be lying here, fretting whether or not Kao hated her, or pitied her.

He either would have understood, or demanded she tell him.

Yio wasn't that brave. She feared the goddess of chaos. She knew exactly what Kao was capable of, and also knew she had no idea when or if the goddess would actually use that power. Trei might not have any respect for the power of a god, but this Fate had more of a sense of self-preservation than that bloody man.

Why did he have to make her feel like a coward? Even now?

He wasn't in her life. He never would be.

Never.

Yio squeezed the fluff-ball into her chest, tucking her chin over it, trying not to cry. She didn't know how to make this pain stop. No Fate had ever been in love before. Was it imprinting like the Fae? Or was it something that hurt, but was possible to love again, like the humans? Was it a wound that healed, like the orks? Or was it a permanent scar like the elfin?

She didn't know.

Nobody knew.

She could wander all over the timelines, but the only Fate who had ever been in love was herself.

And she existed everywhere simultaneously. The only person she could ask was the one lying in a hammock, in the forest, crying and cuddling a soft toy. It didn't seem hopeful.

She needed advice. Someone to talk to.

Yio sat up, wrapping her blanket around herself and making sure to hold onto the toy as she shuffled out of the camp and further into the forest. She leaned against a tree and flicked her hand, tearing open a hole in reality.

"Wake up."

The woman on the other side of the hole groaned and looked up, "Yio... What is it? I just got to sleep."

"I'm camping with Kao."

Her sister sat up immediately, a hand ruffling her pink hair, "Kao? She's actually involving herself in the world?"

Yio nodded, and held up the toy, "She gave me this because I was crying."

"That's adorable." F'rir laughed, and then sighed, "You're still crying, aren't you?"

"I miss him." Yio whispered, struggling to hold back the floodgates.

F'rir sighed, "So what does Kao want?"

"To help me get over Trei." Yio replied, her voice cracking, "Or that's what she says."

F'rir nodded slowly, "If anyone can, it is her, Yio. Maybe it is worth a shot. Not like Kao has given you a choice, is it?"

She shrugged.

F'rir looked at her sadly, breathing slowly, "I know you're hurting. You aren't alone. Luna still has to see him every day. Claven has to watch her future bride get heart broken every day. Astrian... Well I think she just turned to hating herself and avoiding him."

Yio blinked back tears, "How's Alphege, sister?"

F'rir flinched, "That's not a nice story. Wait. You're calling from Eldrasa, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Yio shrugged, "Apparently Kao saw an Entrin here."

"Her name is Elin." F'rir laughed, "She's asleep in my bed. Apparently Yggdrasil sent her down to meet me. So she met Kao. That explains her anxiety... You must be the second invader she spoke about. She's got a rather simple and brutal way of looking at the world."

Yio smiled weakly, "You've avoided the question successfully."

"Not well enough, apparently." F'rir retorted and sighed, "Fine. Last week, Alphege tried to kill herself. She's in permanent stasis in one of the healing pools. I can save her body, but her mind might as well be gone. The longer she's separated from Trei, the worse it gets. Not just depression. All her hormones are... It's like her body is breaking down at the chemical level. She's dying. She would already be dead if she wasn't in stasis."

Yio flinched, "Did you tell him?"

"No." F'rir shook her head, "Alphege didn't want him to know. I'm not sure it would help if he did. He is a powerful god, but the moment he stopped thinking about her all the problems would come flooding back. Elfin aren't meant to imprint. They love, they live, they move on. Trei

didn't give her that. He bound her soul to his. An accident, sure. But it still happened. Just like it's happening with you."

Yio rubbed her eye, wiping away a tear with irritation, "Something's wrong with me, F'rir. I'm getting pulled into time. Like I'm becoming part of the flow of events."

"Not just you." F'rir stated as if it that terrifying fact was a reassurance, "All the celestials are. It looks like... Trei is the first of a new generation. He chose to live in the world, and not above it... And so the 'verse is going to change and make us all join him. Eventually. A few thousand years or so, at a guess."

Yio shook her head, "I shouldn't be here. I should be with you and Sarin. Working out how to deal with this problem. Trying to preserve the balance in the cosmos."

"I don't want your help." F'rir snapped, "I want you to take care of yourself, sister. You have sacrificed yourself multiple times. Paid the ultimate price, repeatedly. If there's any justice, then the 'verse owes you one. Take some time to work out who you are, and what you're feeling. If that means you're a bitter old woman who will torture Trei for eternity, that's fine. If it means you become more aloof than usual, that's fine too. Sarin and I will have your back, no matter what you decide... But take the time to work it out. For now, go with the flow of events. It's something new. It might be interesting to explore."

"An interesting time is another word for an ancient curse." Yio growled and then sighed, leaning her head on her toy, "Fine. You're probably right, F'rir. Not like Kao would be giving me much of a choice anyways."

Her sister laughed, "Truer words were never spoken. Talk to me again, later."

Yio nodded, "Sure."

Kru

Kru ignored the first elf that attacked her as she neared the shrine, just stepping through a shunt in the dimensions to arrive behind them, moving through the archways that lead towards the healing pools, and the roots of Yggdrasil.

The next couple elfin weren't much either. She might be pale from blood loss, weak and tired. But she was still Fae, and there just elfin. Swords meant nothing, blocked even by her weakened and colourless wings. They could rail against her all they liked, it didn't mean they would be successful. They were just getting in her way and irritating her.

She was already pissed off.

Angry at herself for letting her get stabbed. Angry at herself for becoming a traitor. Angry at herself for being too stubborn to die. Angry she had to live in a world that wasn't her own. Angry at herself for betraying her people.

Kru grabbed a spear that tried to cut her throat and pulverised the wood by closing her fist. She turned and glared sideways at the elf, "Just trying to stay alive here, why don't you go somewhere else?"

The elf ran off.

She sighed as she entered the clearing, seeing the dozen brightly glowing blue pools beneath the tree.

Kru flinched, her cheek twitching as her entire body crumpled to the ground, immobile. It was painless, whatever had just happened to her. It had severed her spine, cutting off the nerves. She couldn't breathe. She was dying, albeit slowly.

Small pale and delicate feet walked in front of her slowly, "I am Alfiti Algar, Guardian of Alfheimr. You will not pollute our waters or harm our tree, Fae. The poison of Tyr did not succeed, nor shall you, traitor to your own crown."

They thought she served Tyr. Because she was stupid enough to follow Ashwen into the war. Even Ashwen hadn't known Tyr was involved, she was just trying to avenge the man she loved, the man she had imprinted on. Kru didn't even know anyone who had known Tyr was still alive.

So now she was going to die, finally.

Made sense.

"Grow up, Kru." She heard the mysterious man's voice, followed by an instruction, "Release her. Now."

She slumped sideways, still unable to move or breathe, looking up at a blonde-haired and angry looking elf. It leaned down and picked her up, hissing between the teeth, and then Kru was falling.

She hit the water, and then sank into it. She still couldn't move.

She just floated downwards, wondering if she was about to drown.

Elin

Ancient yellow eyes opened slowly, blinking slowly, adjusting to the darkness they found themselves in. The room felt strange, as if it were under pressure. Yet, it felt familiar and safe. The walls and roof appeared to be grown in place, constructed from some sort of vine or branch. As if they had willingly grown in place by instruction, rather than been forced to through some easier method.

The Entrin sat up slowly, wincing and holding her chest. She looked down in surprise and flinched. A crack ran up from her navel and through her asset up to one of her shoulders. Inside, it glowed a soft red. The infection was spreading. It seemed her estimates for her life span were off, maybe even by an order of magnitude. Death was imminent, not months away.

So that was why Yggdrasil had drawn her into the depths. It was worried about her.

Wherever here was... This was a last ditch effort by the sacred tree to save her.

She swung her roots over the edge of the soft bed and stood up slowly, coughing and holding her chest in agony. She fell forward onto her knees, tears falling from her surprised eyes. This wasn't just pain. She'd never felt pain on this sort of scale before. It made all other pain nothing but a dull memory. A stupid weakness of a child. This was the pain of an adult.

"Don't do that." An irritated voice came, and strong hands picked her up and placed her back in the centre of the bed. The red blanket went over her as Elin coughed violently, crying at the pain. She looked up to the person who had moved her so easily, as she had not weighed several ton.

The pink-haired woman, with eyes as black as night, looked down at her, "Entrin. What the hell are you doing in my realm?"

Elin creaked hoarsely in shock.

The Fate shook her head, "You're poisoned. Poisoned by the same thing that nearly killed Yggdrasil, from what I can tell. Vastras created that virus. Only she knew how to undo it."

Elin touched her chest gently and nodded.

The woman glared at her, shaking her head, "Why did you have to come here? Make my life so difficult. I can't heal you. No one can. Because, technically, there is nothing to heal. The destruction happening inside your body is a natural process. It was kick started by a supernatural virus, but that's long since died out. This is a self-sustaining process. One of the most powerful the witchqueen ever made."

Elin didn't know what she wanted to communicate. It wasn't her fault Yggdrasil drew her here. There was a danger in the forest. That was what mattered, but she wasn't certain how to speak to this angry creature. She wasn't certain that it would even accept whatever she had to say. It seemed that it hated her, already.

"The Entrins nearly destroyed this realm, once." The Fate growled, interrupting her thoughts, "They wiped out the elfin. In fact, the only reason there is a Guardian of the Shrine, is because of your kind. Every world now has one, or similar, because of you and yours. Your race brought war to every world. Tried to conquer it. Because your race... Doesn't view others as equal. Trees and forests matter. The dwellers don't. So why are you here, murdering little monster?"

Elin had certainly killed a number of dwellers that had threatened Eldrasa, that was certain. This creature did know her, to some extent. However, knowing the legend of a people was not knowledge of a person. It was an insult to believe that it might.

This creature was very insulting.

“Oh, shut up.” The pink-haired creature flashed, “Are you just stalking people in Eldrasa, like Yio? Is that it? Are you just a mindless zombie murdering everyone who enters your territory? Or are you here for an actual reason, Entrin?”

Elin’s eyes widened in surprise, causing another coughing fit. The creature could hear her thoughts. It could understand what she knew and what she believed. This was a rare gift. To read the mind of an Entrin was not as simple as reading a dweller. Her thoughts were not electrical synapses. They existed through a different mechanism. Through small chemical processes, pheromones and in a state of flux between the now and the Void.

“Voiden!” The Fate yelled at her, “Shut up! I don’t care! Just tell me why you’ve invaded my realm. My world. Or I will expel you into the Void itself! I will strip you down and tear out your soul and eat it! Do you begin to comprehend you little creature? You haven’t come to my attention before, because you are too small to matter. You have no power, and no strength. Your opinions mean nothing. Tell me why you are here. This is your last chance.”

Elin focused, remembering the moment when Yggdrasil had called to her, drawing her out of the Void.

The creature sighed and dropped onto a nearby seat, glaring at her, “Seriously? A tree calls to you and that’s enough you swore a life debt to it? Damn thing couldn’t even heal you. That’s why you’re here. This is the base of Yggdrasil. My home.”

Elin cocked her head, not quite understanding. So this was the creature called F’rir. The Fate who created the Elfin realms. Yet she had thought the Fates didn’t involve themselves in their worlds. Moving on without care. Why would this one dwell within her realm?

“Oh.” F’rir yawned, “This is just a getaway. My own bedroom is still in the Garden of Eternity. And as soon as Yggdrasil stops panicking over you, I’m headed back there. You helped it, so it wanted to help you. Heal you. Unfortunately, it’s been doing the opposite. Healing magic speeds up the spread of your disease.”

Elin touched her chest, looking at the crack with worry.

“Yeah. You’re dead.” F’rir sighed, inspecting a strand of her hair, “I’d give you three days, at best.”

Elin wondered if there was another who could aid her, or if the Fate truly was the best healer.

“The best healer of Entrin are Entrin.” She cut in, “Your people are dead though. Not a lot of people left who even remember you. You weren’t exactly world conquerors anymore. Wiped out by a mage and an apprentice knight. Not the stuff of songs, is it?”

Elin tossed the word back and forth but couldn’t find a meaning for it. She looked curiously at the Fate.

F’rir looked at her in surprise, still looking for split ends, “Seriously? You don’t know what a song is? Music?”

The wind whistled through the trees. The insects buzzed.

The Fate shook her head, “Music doesn’t just reflect what happens in nature. It has it’s own cadence and balance. Ah. . .”

She sighed and stood up, placing her hands behind her back, “This is a song of your kind. The words you won’t understand, but that doesn’t matter. Listen to it all the same.”

A soft and mournful sound sprang up, breathing through the Fate. Her eyes were closed, her

hands against her chest, as she spoke with intonations that seemed to evoke a reaction inside Elin's core.

She felt as if the earth were calling out to her, as if she were feeling the heartbeat of the world, the heartbeat she normally only felt in the quietest spots of the forest.

"Tan re'gan, nos farr in." The Fate sang with a voice like the zephyrs spiralling through the trees.

Her voice reached higher, and Elin felt as if she wanted to rise along with it, "Ein mar nos dan."

"Reigh'r nar marin." The Fate cried, her voice dropping low and dragging Elin's heart down with it.

Elin felt as if she wanted to call along, like she knew the words even if she did not know what they meant, "Nos farr in. Nos farr in. Tan re'gan!"

The Fate opened her eyes slowly, smiling at her briefly, before sitting down again, "Anyway. That's music."

She wanted to hear more.

She wanted to understand it, to become a part of it. It was like magic for the soul.

"No." F'rir interjected, "I don't normally sing. Look, you're dying. No one can much help you, but I promise if you hurt anyone, I'll kill you myself. I won't wait for you to die. So go back to your forest, and leave us be."

Elin frowned, wondering if she were allowed to sit up. The Fate had put her back in bed last time.

F'rir rolled her eyes, "You stood up too quickly. You need to take things slowly. In fact... The best you could do is ask someone else to take care of you. What about Kao?"

Elin cocked her head.

"The goddess you met in the forest. The one made of water." F'rir replied, "Her name is Kao. She is the goddess of chaos, so whilst you can't really trust her, you can't do anything to stop her either. She is an inevitability. She is unpredictable. She is also the creator of the rest of the celestials. We are all a shadow beside her. Don't piss her off. Or the entire 'verse might piss on you."

Elin nodded slowly.

F'rir stood up, "I'll drop you in the campsite. Try and make a better first impression than you gave me."

Kao

She poured herself out of her bucket slowly, flinching at the cold. Her formless body spread out of the freezing grass slowly, drawing in the moisture from the frost. She thought for a moment as she chewed on the tiny crystals of ice. Things were not going as smoothly as she had hoped. Yio didn't want to be here, and she was hurting even deeper than Kao had thought. Her heart was fixed on the one thing she couldn't have.

Kao had thought that Yio was into the second stage of being dumped. That the Fate had understood that hope was dead, and was into the phase where everything just hurts. The stage before denial and anger. But she wasn't. Yio, even if she didn't know it, still had hope that she'd see Trei again. That he might offer her a kiss again. She still thought she had a chance to earn his attention - not his heart, she knew that wasn't hers... But Yio seemed willing to accept his attention every now and then, as if it would make everything worthwhile.

It made sense, in a fashion. Yio hadn't just fallen in love. She'd imprinted. The only thing her soul desired was to be with him. Death was preferable to separation.

The goddess opened two eyes in her watery form, looking over at the Fate finally sleeping in the hammock, and she almost began to cry. She wondered how often thoughts of suicide crossed the mind of the woman. Yet here she was, still trying. Still fighting. Even willing to accept help from someone who had blitzed in and turned her world upside down instantly.

Yio might well be one of the strongest people that Kao knew.

She pulled her body together slowly, easing upright silently and stretched. She still had her plan.

The hot pot had been kept on a slow boil over night, and she quickly added some rice to it, stirring and leaving it to cool for a little while. They'd have risotto for lunch if she played things right.

She pulled a few things out of her trunk quietly, and began boiling more water with rice as she dropped some eggs onto a fry pan, spreading them out as thinly as she could. Rice omelette was one of her favourite morning indulgences. Warm enough to heat the heart of any goddess on a frigid morning like this.

"Why are we camping in the middle of winter, can I ask?"

Kao glanced over with a grin, "Morning!"

Yio looked at her dumbfounded. The Fate's hair was stretched out sideways, frozen in place by tiny flecks of frost. She was wrapped tightly in her blanket, and her toy was tucked beneath her chin. The woman shook her head and shuffled over, sitting in the chair next to the cooking fires, shivering.

Kao laughed and reached over, flicking the frozen hair and causing the ice to shatter. She grabbed a handful and absorbed them, chewing on the crystals as she went back to cooking, "Breakfast isn't that far away. What do you think we should do today?"

"Not a walk." Yio pouted, "Too cold."

Kao scratched her head with a tendril of hair as she worked, "Cold? Oh! How about we go to the hot springs?"

Yio hesitated, trying to hide her emotions, "That sounds okay."

Kao flipped the egg once and glanced sideways at her camping companion, "Did you get the

tailor to make any clothes for you? Or just for Kru?”

“I thought I’d pick up a dress or two from home.” Yio replied, and Kao pouted, “But we’re camping! Just because you can teleport doesn’t mean you should.”

The Fate rolled her black eyes, “Fine. I guess I need to buy a new outfit in town, then.”

Kao frowned, “Fine... But we really should stop going in to town everyday.”

Yio laughed at her, “You really want to take this seriously, don’t you? We’re celestials. Having everything we want on a whim is sort of our thing. Except people. People are terrible and never do what you want.”

Kao stuck out her tongue, and then flipped the egg smoothly onto a plate, and held it out. Yio took it with a half smile, and Kao turned back to making another one, “Oh. I think we’re going to have a guest today. Or it feels like it.”

Yio ignored her, glowing as she ate the first mouthful.

Kao smiled in the cold wind, the fire in front of her, and a friend beside her. This is what camping should be about. Friendship, good food and enjoying the moment. Feeling free of the pressures and responsibilities she was completely neglecting for her friend. It seemed though she hadn’t managed to get Yio to forget Trei, she’d successfully made her forget she should be helping Sarin and F’rir. That was something.

There was a soft pop in the air as Kao finished plating the second egg.

“This is Elin.” One of the newcomers stated, obviously intending to leave, but she trailed off unexpectedly. Kao grinned, holding up the plate, “Joining us, F’rir?”

The pink-haired woman hesitated, and then jumped into a seat that appeared as she did, grabbed the plate thankfully. She glared over at her sister, “I am so jealous. It’s been aeons since I’ve had Kao’s cooking.”

Yio stuck her tongue out, and then turned back to carefully shovelling it into her mouth.

Kao snapped her fingers, a chair growing up out of the ground, made of roots and vines. “Take a seat, Elin. We’re having breakfast.”

The Entrin collapsed onto it gratefully, holding her chest, and the crack running through her entire body. Kao hid her emotion at that. The creature was dying. At this point the damage was irreversible. It seemed that F’rir had already told her the chances.

Kao cleaned the pan quickly with her bare hand, letting the liquid sizzle and boil, and eating the scraps she found there. She put the pan back and frowned, “It’s been a while since I cooked for an Entrin. Have you ever had daes ka’tan, Elin?”

The creature looked at her in surprise, and F’rir answered with her mouthful, “She hasn’t. Also, she doesn’t speak.”

Kao frowned, looking at the young dying woman again, “You don’t know the Entrin tongue, do you?”

The creature swayed her head back and forth, her moss like hair swaying even further. Yellow eyes looked at her with a deepset fear. The fear that Kao knew well from her own childhood. The fear of the unknown. All creatures had attacked this one. Attempted to kill her. There’s only one way she survived the genocide of the Entrins. She was a child when the forest called her here, and saved her. She’d grown up alone, speaking only with the trees that she shepherded, guided as if by

instinct.

The mind of this creature was under-developed. She'd never had a chance to live to her full potential. Entrins weren't supposed to live alone. They lived in clusters, families. Their own forest, of their own kind. This one had never had that chance.

Kao reached into the dirt, easily pulling up various vegetables and smaller nutrient-rich minerals, pouring them into the pan. She flicked it quickly, being sure to only lightly char the outside, "I was taught to make this by an older Entrin. Her name was Yuu. She was queen of your people, once."

Elin leaned forward, yellow eyes growing wide, and F'rir choked, hastily speaking, "She just asked about a thousand questions."

Kao laughed, pouring the meal onto a plate and plucking a couple blades of grass to garnish it, "I'm not as good as Yuu. Haven't had a chance to practice cooking for an Entrin in... Oh, I don't know, three thousand years?"

She handed it over, and saw the glowing interest in the brilliant yellow eyes. Kao shrugged, "I've been alive longer than the 'verse, girl. I remember when the first Entrin was born. A tree, growing tired with the migration of the forest, began to think. Then it began to try and tell the other trees to stop and settle. It was an interesting moment."

Yio laughed, glancing sideways at Elin, "By moment, she means a thousand years or so. It took a long time for the first Entrin to wake up."

Elin looked curiously at her, and Yio tugged her hair briefly, "I'm a Fate. Outside of the timelines. Or at least, mostly. Things have been different recently."

Kao poured the excess liquid from the rice into a cup, glancing between the two sisters, "How is it that you can hear Elin? I didn't think you two could hear thoughts."

"Timelines." F'rir spoke, still clearly eating, "Elin could speak in some of the others. In some of them she even knew Yuu."

Elin turned to the Fate in surprise, nearly dropping a mouthful of food, and the Fate shuddered at the sight, carefully closing the mouth of the Entrin, "Almost every possibility has a chance to exist sometime, somewhere. It is the role of the Fate to see it, and guide it. To ensure that which must not happen, does not."

Yio put her empty plate down, and immediately retreated inside her blanket, "We were thinking of visiting the hot springs today. How does that sound, Elin?"

The Entrin looked sideways at her with concern, and Kao shrugged, "We're not here to hurt your forest, Elin. We won't hurt it."

The tree-like woman stiffened, and then winced as a red glow emerged from the wound on her chest.

Yio flinched, and F'rir stopped eating.

Kao stepped through her cooking equipment, one hand landing on the girl's chest, and then Elin let out a strange squeal that seemed to cause the entire forest to shake as Kao's hand liquefied and continued inside, into the crack.

The goddess glared down, concentrating as she spread out inside Elin, into every crack and orifice that she could find. She filled the young Entrin, feeling the natural hollows within her wooden structure that allowed her to breathe during the coldest winter and hottest summer. She united

with the sap spiralling away inside the creature. Kao growled softly as she chased the corruption, deeper and deeper into the Entrin.

She pulled back suddenly, and Elin leaned forward, sighing heavily.

Kao took two hesitant steps, and then fell forward onto her hands and puked black and putrid smelling sap everywhere. She coughed, trying to breathe, and heard Yio ask her cautiously, “Are you okay, Kao?”

“I... I think -” She cut off as another wave of nausea hit her and she vomited again.

Wintry

A single ear peeked out from under the blanket, moving around briefly before retreating.

Wintry rubbed her hands together, breathing on them, under the blanket. It was cold today. Too cold. She wasn't getting up today. That was one of the benefits of everyone thinking you were dead. You could take the day off, and no one would know. You only felt as guilty as you let yourself.

Her stomach growled, cramping, and she winced.

That could get her up.

She pushed herself upright, still heavily wrapped in the blanket, just her face peeking out of the top into the blistering cold. She glared at the mist settling on her floors, and then turned her attention to breakfast.

Her mouth opened slowly, and lyrical sounds emerged. Twisting and changing as the words met the air. The sounds escalated, before falling again. They sounded like the fragile whispers of the forest, the words of an ancient and proud people. Magic words, which once had the power to tear down kingdoms, to slay kings, and to enslave entire worlds.

It was these words of power that emerged from her timidly.

These words that dragged a loaf of bread through the air, cooking it, and landing it on a plate in her lap.

Fragranced honey spilled down beside it into a small dish.

Wintry smiled, dipping her toast and chewing it slowly. It really was a waste of magic. Enormously powerful magic. If there was a mage nearby they might have felt it. She didn't care. Today was her day off.

Kyrus

The bartender heard the crash just as his feet hit the ground, waking him up.

He stumbled up the ladder, and out of the trapdoor behind the bar, yawning as he drew a dagger. He looked at the person who had been banging on top of the bar top, and glared at them slowly, "We're closed."

The Guardian shrugged, "Oh, sorry. I hadn't noticed."

He glanced sideways at the door that had been shut, bolted, and a beam placed across it. It was in three places on the floor. "Really."

"So I was thinking, that maybe having a Fae here might just be a risk. For you."

He shrugged, turning and lighting a burner beneath one of the barrels. He rolled it, softly saying an incantation. He turned back to her as he was putting on his apron, "She pays her bills. Better than I can say for most of my customers."

The Guardian glared at him, "It will go badly for you if the Fae keeps staying here. This is just a friendly warning, but it doesn't have to be."

Kyrus yawned, his tired brain still pulling into gear, as he entered the kitchen, "What do you normally have for breakfast?"

He heard a strangled sound of confusion, and he glanced over at her glaring at him. Kyrus shrugged, "You thought the bar was open, right? May as well fix you something. The Fae barely eats. Most of the others have burned out their taste buds with liquor. How about a treat? I could make some cal'ant'al. Been a little while, but I have the recipe around here somewhere."

The Guardian responded with more angry threats, but Kyrus wasn't intimidated by those blue eyes. He'd known the one who trained her, and Alphege had a sweet tooth like few others. That woman, warrior and mighty killer she might be, had still just been a person. So that's how Kyrus viewed her replacement.

A warrior. A dangerous one.

But first and foremost, a person.

He flipped the squares of bread in the frying pan, lightly browning the edges, and then onto the plate they went. He extinguished the flames and grabbed a few things as he left the kitchen.

The plate slid in front of the Guardian, followed by a jaw of syrup, and some utensils. He turned to the keg he'd been heating and placed a heavy mug underneath it and opened the tap, shrugging, "I hope you enjoy it."

"You're an idiot. A damned idiot." The Guardian replied through a mouthful, "You're going to get yourself killed one of these days, Kyrus."

He shrugged, tapping off the keg and handing her the warm mug of cocoa, "Maybe. That comes with my line of work. You've seen my customers. Most of them haven't made a problem just because finding a new bartender would be too much of a hassle."

"I'm not like them." She growled angrily.

Kyrus nodded, "I know. You're the Guardian of the Shrine, Alfiti Algar, daughter of Alphege Algar. Yggdrasil wouldn't have chosen you if you were any less intimidating than your mother. If you were any less capable, then your mother would still be terrifying Guardian who used to get blind drunk with me."

The Guardian twitched, as if considering whether to kill him or not.

He could wait.

She picked up the cocoa and sipped it, and her eyes softened slowly. “You’re lucky you know how to make decent food and drink.”

Kyrus laughed shrugging as he began his rounds of the tables, putting down chairs, “You know, that might just come in handy in this line of work.”

Yio

She watched as the goddess continued to violently puke black claggy liquid all over the ground and looked to the Entrin she'd pulled it out of. She seemed faint, swaying in her chair. Yio reached over, placing a hand on her shoulder. The creature smiled weakly. Yio looked down at the crack in her chest and smiled softly. Of course. That was Kao all over.

When something became impossible, all you had to do was add a little bit of chaos to the mix.

The edge of the crack showed the beginnings of green moss already. The beginnings of the Entrin healing process. It wasn't an efficient one, and was probably sucking all the energy out of the woman.

Yio walked over to the keg of water lying next to Kao's trunk and hefted it up and walked over, dropping it with a thud in front of the Entrin. She held out her hand, a long and thin metal bar appearing in it, and prised the lid off. "Hop in."

The Entrin looked at her in confusion, and Yio picked her up, feeling surprised at how lightweight she was, and dropped her in. "Soak. You've just spent a lot of energy. It'll take you a bit."

Elin nodded her head slowly, and started to shiver.

Yio winced. She didn't really know what to do. It had been far too long since she'd actually met an Entrin. Was she about to drown her?

"She's... In... Shock." Kao gasped, swaying as she stood up slowly, "She needs nutrients. Not a bath. A feast."

Yio scratched her head, "Minerals?"

"I wish." Kao sighed heavily, "She needs what the forest provides. Fertiliser."

Yio screwed up her nose, "Ew."

"Hey, I just sucked a face full of cursed poison." Kao pouted, "Your turn."

Yio looked at her distastefully, "And where exactly am I meant to find it?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" Kao replied blankly.

She should have seen that one coming. She put her blanket and soft toy on the chair, and flicked her hand, a bag and pair of gloves appearing. "Just so you know, this sucks."

Kru

The sun was beaming down. She could feel it already. The light splitting as it struck the crystals of her skin, breaking apart and forming the dust that was the source of life in a Fae. She could feel it beginning to fall from her, particles of red and blue, tumbling through the air towards the ground.

She was lying on her back, wings spread.

Kru put a hand over her eyes and opened them slowly. She wasn't sure what was happening. She could remember being stabbed, and one of her lungs beginning to fill. Stumbling down the road.

A tree.

Yggdrasil. She'd been trying to get to the healing pools at the roots of Yggdrasil.

The Fae moved her hand, looking up cautiously. The branches spread and spiralled overhead, dripping green flecks slowly. She reached up, shivering as she touched one of them. So she'd managed to heal, then. Somehow.

The voice.

He'd been here. If he hadn't... The guardian had stopped her. Was going to kill her. He'd stopped them. Saved her. How was that even possible? He didn't exist, did he? She'd only seen him when the Fae had tried to kill her. What was he?

"If you're awake, you can leave." A voice growled angrily, and she looked over to see an elf with a spear resting in between the crook of her legs as she sharpened the blade. "Are you deaf? Go."

Kru sat up, wincing as she felt some stiffness along her back, focused at the base. She touched it gingerly, feeling a scar there. "I thought Yggdrasil could heal anything."

"Except a wound caused by Yggdrasil." The elf replied, "This is the Spear of Algar. She is... Unkind."

Kru yawned, standing and beginning to stretch, feeling the scar tissue limiting her flexibility, "Who was he?"

The elf glared at her, "I have requested you leave."

"The man who stopped you." Kru insisted, "I've never seen him properly. Who was he?"

"I will kill you, Fae." The elf snapped, "I don't want you here."

Kru turned to her, flashing her fangs, "He stopped you last time. Do you think he won't if you attack me again? Who the hell is he? Who has taken such a fierce interest in me?"

"A celestial." The elf replied, grinding her teeth, "If you know no more, I will not reveal it. Now, leave."

Kru sighed, rolling up her wings, "Fine."

"Wait..." The elf said bitterly as she turned to go, and Kru paused, "Yes?"

"The queen still wishes to see you." The elf nearly whispered.

Kru shrugged, "And?"

She walked away, through the towering bows and arches of the trees that lead to Yggdrasil's shrine. The most sacred place for all elfin. It felt strange to have entered such a sacred place so easily. She wasn't the strongest or fastest of the Fae. She wasn't a slouch, by any means. She had

been appointed as one of Ashwen's lieutenants for good reason. Yet, this was the most well guarded place of all elfkind. Defended by their greatest warrior.

The celestial, the man. He had to have helped her.

She wasn't sure why. He'd saved her life, that was clear. Each time, in fact. He was coming to her whenever she walked close to death. Demanding that she stand up and fight. He didn't seem to care what for, so long as it meant something to her. He was willing her forwards.

Manipulating her. Just like the Fates had manipulated the Arbiter. She didn't want to be a toy or a tool. This man was no friend of hers. If he kept interfering in the course of her life, she would have to find a way to take action. To stop him.

It seemed like the only way she'd be able to beat him would be to let herself die. That was an uncomfortable thought.

Elin

It felt strange to be able to breathe so freely.

She shifted her toes in the bath, soaking it in, feeling the energy slowly returning to her cramped limbs. She'd been in too much shock after Kao had attacked her to realise it, but she could breathe, for the first time in so long. Too long to remember. The pain that had always gripped her chest was gone, the pressure that had always been pushing on her chest was gone. The tingling and burning of her arms and legs were gone.

She wished she could speak like the others. She wanted to tell the goddess how grateful she was. She wanted to be able to express how much she appreciated. Wanted to be able to shower her in praises and promises. She would be the slave of the goddess for the rest of time if it was her desire. The goddess had taken away a pain she hadn't realised she was carrying. A horror that had blinded her mind.

She'd simply acted on instinct. That was why she had protected the forest. Not really out of some sort of guilt or debt. She hadn't had the mental capacity to weigh her actions. She had become little more than a tree. She'd rooted herself down to Eldrasa, and become a part of it, whilst waiting to die.

"You're not cured."

She glanced over where the watery goddess was crouched in her bucket, occasionally vomiting black sap over the edge. The small puddle shifted, eyes appearing slowly, "I didn't cure you, Elin. I don't understand the curse enough for that. I just... Reset the disease a bit. It'll come back. But I've bought you some time."

Time, and mind and soul. Elin felt so free now. She worried though. The goddess was still being sick. What if the disease had infected her as well? Was that possible? It had a magical cause, in most of the senses. It might be possible it infected her, and if Elin had to watch her die, she would never forgive herself. This stranger was one of the kindest creatures she had ever encountered.

The goddess rippled the top of what might be considered her head, "We'll keep fighting to cure you, Elin. You don't need to be afraid. I haven't given up yet."

That wasn't her worry, though it might make sense that the goddess thought that.

Elin raised a tired arm out of the briny mush and pointed.

The two eyes blinked, "Me? Oh. I'm fine. Or I will be. I always will be. This physical shell is just a physical shell. I prefer it, because of the simplicity, flexibility and the fact that hurting it is next to impossible, but it isn't me. I have no body. This is just something I'm using for now. It isn't really poisoned. It can't be. It just needs to cough up all the ick."

A creature without a physical form. A creature that preferred to be without physical form. That was something that Elin had never considered could exist. This goddess was strange. If she truly did desire to be without form, then why had she taken one?

The slime blinked, "Ah. Why take the form?"

Elin nodded.

"For Yio." The slime rippled in a sort of shrug, "She's my friend, and she's hurting. I'm trying to help her."

Elin moved the word around inside her head slowly. Friend. It was familiar to her, somewhat.

To her it had never meant particularly much. Strangers might have friends, and that spelled trouble for her when she tried to eliminate them.

Her yellow eyes widened at the cascade of memories.

How many people had she killed over the years?

For the incredible transgression of exploring their own home?

Elin looked down at her tub, feeling the tears forming in her eyes.

“Do you have any friends?”

She wanted to tell the goddess that wasn’t it, that it wasn’t why she was upset, but she wasn’t sure how.

“Enough!” Yio snapped, appearing with an empty tin bucket and a towel wrapped around her hair, “I am not playing go-between for you two!”

The goddess glanced over at her, “What did I do?”

“Elin is upset because she just realised she’s murdered over two hundred innocent people.” Yio snapped, dropping the bucket at the back of the tarp, “Look, I am not going to do this. Peeking at the future is getting harder. Seems I’m part of events in this timeline. So looking around isn’t going to be possible. So... We need to teach Elin how to talk.”

She looked up in surprise at the pink-haired woman, who smiled softly at her, “Yeah. You can talk, Elin. If I remember though, it’s a skill. You can only speak the language of your people. Something about the tones resonant with nature, bringing the words into being.”

The goddess sloshed out of her bucket, slowly reforming into a two-legged creature with a stretch, and only a small cough, “Entrinis is a difficult language, Yio. I never mastered it. How are we supposed to teach her?”

Yio shrugged, “I know enough to get by. Sarin is the real expert... But we’re not quite on speaking terms at the moment.”

The goddess laughed, “Do I want to know why?”

“No.” Yio replied, and looked over at Elin, “I guess we should start easy. You need to focus on a word, feel it in your heart. Become one with it. So... I guess we’ll give you a word, and then when you’re ready we’ll head to the springs. You can practice all day in the water. What do you think?”

Elin nodded. It would be nice to stay with these two.

“E’lani.” Yio spoke softly, and Elin felt her heart soar, as if she’d been struck with a bolt of lightning. Her entire body seemed to come more alive. She looked down at the moss that had been slowly covering the wound on her chest, and blinked in surprise. The hole had been sealed over with moss. Whatever that word was had healed her. A word of power.

The goddess smiled, patting Yio on the back, “Good one. That was your name, Elin. Your name, in your own tongue. Elin is a... Elfin bastardisation of the name. It’s kinda obvious, if you listen to any Entrinis. Though I guess, you haven’t.”

Elin climbed out of the barrel, and slowly began brushing herself off, and smiled to herself. E’lani.

She didn’t know who she was, not really.

But she wanted to.

A towel landed on her back, and she looked over at Yio who was trying not to laugh, “Do any of us three have any sense of modesty at all?”

Elin suddenly realised she’d been flashing her privates.

And walking around the forest naked for years.

She covered her face with her hair.

Kao

She danced happily as they ran up the road, munching on a pine cone she'd found.

Behind her the other two walked more cautiously, Yio just trying to be normal, Elin being terrified of walking out in the open.

Kao jumped, kicking her feet together. It felt good to move, and she was looking forward to seeing the faces of the other two when they got to the springs. She had a surprise waiting for them there.

She paused, chewing slowly. She felt as if she were forgetting something.

She shrugged. It probably wasn't important.

The hot springs were something she'd been looking forward to since she'd started this endeavour. She'd always made a point of visiting them since she'd first been to Eldrasa. It was a little bit of a shock to the other patrons when the goddess sort of melted into the water, but she didn't care. It might well be one of the most relaxing things that any realm had to offer. She'd even slept overnight in them once, after a particularly chaotic period in time.

She forward flipped, bouncing off her hands and landing on her feet with a flourish. She turned and winked at Yio who just rolled her eyes. Kao turned back, grinning to herself. Yio had liked what she'd seen, even if she didn't want to mention it.

Kao paused as she arrived at the gateway towards the main entrance, and she leaned on a post as the others approached.

Yio sighed, "They're closed, Kao."

She glanced over at the old sign nailed to the post and waved a hand, "Oh, that's always there. She'll let us in."

Yio rolled her eyes, "How long has it been since you were here? A hundred years? Might have changed ownership since then."

"Not this one." Kao laughed, turning and heading down the path, "Come on, Elin! I'm sure she'll be excited to meet you, too!"

She heard an uncertain creak, and an exasperated sigh from Yio.

Kao flung open the locked door, snapping the chain, and announced, "I'm back!"

There was a shuffle as the owner entered the room, looking slightly perplexed. Yio sighed heavily, "You broke the lock. They were closed. Come on, you're a total embarrassment."

The woman in the fluffy blue dressing gown looked up at the strange three, and then slowly put on a pair of glasses from her pocket. As she did she burst into a grin, "Kao'el, baby!"

Yio looked at her in surprise, "What?"

Kao ran over, grabbing the woman as she leaped into her arms, spinning and kissing her. She put her down, arms still around the owner and looked over, "You probably remember Yio, and this new one is Elin, or E'lani."

Yio stepped forward hesitantly, "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Wintry

A voice called out, and Wintry groaned to herself, slipping out of the blanket.

She'd been sure she locked the door last night.

She shuffled into the reception room, wrapped tightly in her blue dressing gown, and glared at the doorway, where three shadows stood.

A familiar voice spoke, "You broke the lock. They were closed. Come on, you're a total embarrassment."

She pulled her glasses out of the front pocket and slipped them on.

Her heart did a flip in shock. "Kao'el, baby!"

She could barely believe it. The goddess had come back to her, again. It had been so long since she'd seen that familiar face, that slender form around a body that didn't need to have any form at all.

The pink-haired woman beside her turned in surprise to the goddess, "What?"

Wintry felt her stomach turn. That was Yio. It really was. Her best friend for so many years. The woman assigned to executing her by the court. The woman who had carried out her execution without a single complaint or hesitation.

Kao bridged the gap between them, and Wintry leapt into her arms, kissing her softly. She felt Kao's arms go around her, spinning her happily. She tasted pieces of pine cone on Kao's tongue. Wintry felt the kiss break, and began to discretely shovel the indigestible wood bits into her cheek, so she could spit them out later.

Kao held her tightly, glancing back at the others, "You probably remember Yio, and this new one is Elin, or E'lani."

It was an Entrin. That was plain astonishing. She'd thought they were all dead. Cursed and dead. But if anyone was going to be friends with the dead and forgotten, it would be Kao'el.

Yio stepped forward, looking downright wrathful, "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Wintry felt her stomach very nearly leave her mouth. She certainly felt as if she were back on the execution dais.

Kyrus

He looked up at the doorway as a group of steel-clad soldiers wandered cautiously through the doors, inspecting every surface and every customer.

He frowned, these were guards. They were isolating threats, preparing to allow for their client to enter.

It never went well when these sorts of folk came to the bar.

A radiant woman, dressed in white, entered slowly, and Kyrus' eyes widened and he bowed instantly, and heard some of his customers doing the same, and even a few half-hearted voices called, "Hail!"

Hail to the Queen.

"Bartender." A soft voice spoke, and he swallowed, "My queen?"

"I am looking for a Fae. I understand she frequents this establishment."

Kyrus smiled nervously, "Aye. She drinks and sleeps here. Last I heard, she was heading for Yggdrasil."

"I am aware." The queen replied, "However, I expect she will ignore my summons and return here, once she wakes."

Kyrus tried not to let his utter anxiety show. The Fae had been ignoring a royal request. That wasn't just stupid, it was a crime in and of itself. Was Kru really trying to get herself killed? She'd just survived. Apparently.

"I will wait here, for her."

Kyrus looked up uncertainly, "I wouldn't recommend it, your majesty."

She shrugged, "These knights are not just for show. I am sorry for the business it may cost you, but you have been serving an oathbreaker."

Kyrus smiled tightly and nodded, and then indicated a booth on the far wall, "From there you'll be able to see her as she arrives. How about some food as you wait?"

Yio

The Fate looked at the grey-haired woman wrapped around Kao, and shook her head. There was no doubt that Kao had forgotten. Completely and utterly just forgot.

Yio had murdered this woman. Executed her.

The crimes listed against her name were innumerable. She had faced all the celestials in open judgement and been unanimously condemned. Yio had been selected as the Fate to carry out the sentence. And she had. She had torn asunder her soul and scattered the remains across all timelines to the very edges of the 'verses. It shouldn't be even possible that she was standing here.

That meant one thing only. Kao had been the one to resurrect her, in direct violation of just about every treaty that had ever been made.

The woman however, seemed to remember. Seemed like your own death might have a lasting impact.

Kao glanced between them, "Oh you're not still hung up on that, are you Yio?"

"Genocide, war mongering, weapons of mass destruction leading to millions of years of war." Yio growled, "It's the sort of thing that has a lasting impact. I'm the one who freaking killed her, Kao. Why did you bring her back?"

Kao leaned her head atop the other woman's, "I would have thought that'd be obvious."

Yio blushed, turning red, "Wait. You actually care about someone?"

"No." The other woman sighed, pushing herself out of Kao's grip, "It isn't like that, Yio. I like her. She just likes the sex. She brought me back for my sake, not hers. And I know what I did was wrong. I accepted the judgement without protest. I even said sorry to you."

"I know!" Yio snapped, "But you know what I'm supposed to do now, right? If Kao never brought me here, I could keep ignoring you being alive. Pretending. But not now. I've met you, talked with you. I'll be violating just about every law that exists if I don't report you."

Kao sighed, "You're being rude, Yio."

Elin creaked nervously, and Yio sighed, "Sorry. Elin, this is Wintry. She's a... Protoanimarum. Sort of like human, sort of like elf."

The Entrin curtsied slightly with her moss skirt, and the woman bowed back with hands clasped, and then sighed, "You were just thinking about the hot springs, weren't you, Kao'el, baby?"

The goddess shrugged, "I still don't see the problem."

"You wouldn't." Wintry replied, "Go ahead and jump in. You too, Elin. I think Yio and I need to have a talk about things."

Yio dropped onto a waiting seat, and looked at the ceiling as the others shuffled out. She wasn't particularly comfortable leaving Elin alone with the goddess of chaos, especially not right after she'd rediscovered modesty, but there wasn't a lot of choice in this situation.

Wintry sat down beside her, "I'm sorry."

"I know." Yio replied angrily, "Sorry. I'm not angry at you. I'm angry at your girlfriend."

"She doesn't love me." Wintry replied, "She doesn't know how. She always tells me you're her best friend in the whole world. Is that how you would describe your relationship?"

Yio smiled tiredly, “No. But I guess, from her perspective, I probably am. Things look different to Kao. Smaller.”

“She gets to not care.” Wintry nodded, “That’s her prerogative as the most powerful creature in all of existence. Even stronger than that boy I’ve heard about.”

“That’s why she brought me here.” Yio shook her head, “Trei doesn’t care about me, either. Probably expected we’d get along like a house on fire.”

The grey haired woman leaned her head on Yio’s shoulder, “We did, once.”

“I had to kill you for it.” Yio replied angrily, trying not to cry. “You were my friend. Right up until you betrayed me and everyone I knew.”

“I was wrong.” Wintry sighed, “I’ve always said that.”

“It doesn’t make it any easier.” Yio complained, wiping a stubborn tear away with irritation, “I don’t want to have to watch you die again. I don’t want preventing your resurrection to be among my duties. I just wish I could forget seeing you.”

“You knew I was here.”

Yio shrugged, letting her head lean sideways onto Wintry, “I knew you were somewhere. I always thought it was the Orkish Burnlands. I couldn’t get a fix on you, so I figured it was one of the highly magical worlds, and I never thought you’d try to hide out with those who might reveal you to the rest of the celestials. Had to be a place where no one prayed to a god. I thought.”

“F’rir knows I’m alive.” Wintry whispered, “She pretended not to see me when she stumbled on Kao resurrecting me. I guess she was sent by the others to see what Kao’el was up to. Probably told them not to care or interfere and moved on. So I kinda thought hiding in her backyard would help. It isn’t like anyone around here knows what I am.”

Yio smiled weakly, “Great. So if I don’t report this, I’m a traitor. If I do, you and my sister both die forever, and I have to live with consequences as a daily reminder for eternity. Kao never thinks through.”

“She does.” Wintry replied hastily, “She just doesn’t. . . See things the way we do. She probably thought you’d be happy to have a friend, and a friend who understands when someone doesn’t love you back.”

“You betrayed me.” Yio replied, “I can never trust you after that.”

“I understand.” Wintry replied quietly, “I do. I’m not going to fight you.”

Yio launched to her feet, spinning to glare at the woman angrily, “That isn’t helpful! You’re just making me feel like crap! I don’t want to have to make this damn choice!”

“Then don’t.” Wintry stood up, “I’ll make the report. I’ll tell everyone where I am. I’ll keep you out of this.”

“No!” Yio snapped, “I don’t want you to die.”

“We don’t always get what we want!” Wintry replied in exasperation, “I’ve tolerated existence for ten thousand years, because every couple hundred a girl I like turns up and is extremely hands-on. I don’t have what I want. I never have, and never will. But I’m not having you take the blame for me.”

The door slid open, and a dripping watery and slimy figure appeared, “Are you two done fighting yet?”

Yio sighed, “You’re making the floor gross, Kao.”

The goddess rolled her eyes, “But I want Wintry to join us.”

“She’s got a death warrant.” Yio responded, and Kao shrugged, “Not anymore, though.”

Both looked at each other and back to her, “What do you mean, Kao?”

The goddess sighed heavily, “Well, after I resurrected her, I went around to the heads of each celestial group and bullied them into granting her a secret pardon.”

Yio blinked slowly and then turned and ripped open a small portal in the air, “Sarin!”

The portal closed as her sister tried to ignore her, she tore it open again, “Woman!”

Sarin sighed, glaring at the portal, “I’m in the middle of some tense negotiations with Summer. This better be bloody important.”

“I’m standing next to Wintry.” Yio hissed through her teeth, “Kao tells me you pardoned her?”

“Secret pardon.” Sarin winced, rubbing the back of her head, “I wasn’t supposed to tell you or Kao would... Be Kao.”

Yio facepalmed, and smiled tightly, “Thanks.”

She closed the portal and turned to Kao, “So... You thought I was just catching up with my friend out here?”

Kao shrugged, “What else would you be doing?”

“Idiot.” Wintry muttered and sighed, “Well, Yio, I think we could do with the water now.”

She rolled her shoulders, “Not bloody wrong.”

Kru

“You’re back. Again.”

Kru glanced over at the bartender and shrugged. “And?”

The elf rolled his eyes and then thumbed towards a group in the corner. Kru glanced over and sighed heavily. It was just a matter of time.

The group stood out. Six knights in shining and polished armour, surrounding a woman dressed in white silk. Her ears were flattened against her head, and her cheeks were red. She could hear the others in the tavern gossiping.

Kru smiled and walked over to her usual bar stool and sat down, dropping a silver coin on the table, “What have you got?”

He looked at her, “You should talk to her.”

“Nah.” Kru yawned, “She’ll come talk to me when she’s ready.”

The bartender scratched the back of his head and sighed, “Fine. Uh... I got something else from the Evening Realms.”

Kru laughed, “They aren’t selling much stuff a non-elf would be interested in, are they?”

“No.” He shook his head, “I’ve sold out of six kegs of spring wine, but you’re my only customer for the weird... Eh... Faen stuff.”

Kru shrugged, “I’m Fae. I’m weird to an elf. So, don’t keep me in suspense.”

He reached under the bar top and pulled out a dusty bottle and set it on the table, “I can’t read Fae, so I have no idea what this is.”

Kru picked it up, dusting off the label, “This is... Oh. That’s disappointing. Cough syrup.”

The elf’s ears went flat against his head, “Oh.”

Kru shrugged, “If this winter keeps up I’ll buy it from you. Meantime, how about an ale?”

The bartender turned to pour, and Kru heard the clank as a knight stepped up behind her, “The Queen wishes to speak to you.”

“Sure. Tell her she can come over.”

The sword drew before she finished her sentence. She glared at the bartender until he set the drink down in front of her, as the sword rested against her throat. Kru ignored him, lifting the tankard and downing it slowly, gulp by gulp. She breathed a satisfied sigh and put the drink on the table. The moment the tankard rested her fist slammed up, hitting the knight hard enough in the head to crush the visor. He went flying.

She heard the other five swords unsheathe and dropped another silver piece, “Another.”

The bartender flinched, but he was more scared of her than the knights. He started pouring as they moved in behind her, circling and at the ready. Kru picked up her drink, “Miss Queen can walk over here if she wants to talk to me, boys.”

One of the knights lunged towards her, and Kru raised a hand in the air. She needed something violent, but not too violent. She needed to limit collateral damage, and ensure the queen wouldn’t get hit by any side effects. Luckily, she had just the thing.

Gold coins shot out of her upraised hand, slamming into the faces of the men and women hiding

behind their visors, and knocking them flat on their butts. They all groaned, trying to hold their faces, as Kru calmly drank her ale, more slowly this time, savouring the taste.

She heard one of the knights getting up, shifting their feet into a fighting stance, but she also heard silken cloth moving slowly. She put down the tankard as they approached and sighed, "You know I've been avoiding you. Is it that hard to take a hint?"

"I tolerate Faen passage through this realm. I even tolerate the occasional crime committed by your people against mine. However, things are more tense than they have been in quite some time, Fae. My greatest warrior lies dying." The tones were lyrical, as if the person behind them was some ideal of perfection.

Kru sipped her ale, saying nothing.

"I wish for you to assist those attempting to care for the warrior."

Kru burst out laughing, spraying ale, "Seriously? That's Gaian magic. Move on. No Fae is better than an elf."

"I understand this, I also understand that you skilled in alchemy."

Kru flipped a coin idly in her fingers before evaporating it, "Skilled is kinda a relative term. Compared to an elf? Probably. Compared to someone like say... Lady Astrian? No way."

"The materials our doctors need cannot be mined in Eldrasa. They aren't pure enough." The Queen continued, "The portal allows some trade, but the Fae appear to be limiting the supply, and will not supply us in the amounts the doctors believe are necessary."

Kru sighed heavily, "Yeah. I guess I might be able to help with that. So you've answered why you're here. You haven't told me why I should care."

The entire room dropped to dead silence, as if every elf in the room was too terrified to breathe.

The Queen sat down beside her slowly, "It depends, really."

"On?"

"Whether wish to stay in the realm. Or leave it in pieces."

Kru smiled over at her, "Seriously? Threats? Your boys over there aren't the worst in the realm."

"No, but Alfiti is the one who gave you that lovely new scar. I'd hate to have to ask her to repeat that performance." The Queen replied tersely, her calm demeanour beginning to show cracks.

Kru laughed, "Miss Queen, I don't care. That's the why your threats won't work. Not because I somehow think I'm unstoppable, I'm really not. I'm not the best fighter in my own realm, why would I be here? The Guardian of Algar is famous, universally. Well, maybe not to humans. I don't think I'm better than them. I'm probably not even worth the effort to one of them... But I don't care if I live or die. I've already lost everything. I'm a traitor to my own people. I've lost my family, my friends, my realm. I've lost my seat on the council, and my best friend has been expelled and banished to a realm beyond the bloody Void. I'm alone, and I have nothing left to live for. I don't drink a way every day just because I enjoy it. I'm hoping that one day I won't wake up."

The Queen looked at her for the first time, turning her scorching blue eyes to her, and Kru smiled. The Queen sighed heavily, "You mean it. You truly see no value in your own soul. Strange. I would not threaten you if your soul did not have value to me."

Kru rolled her eyes and turned back to her ale.

The Queen laughed, “How about this? If you assist me, I’ll do you a favour. Anything within the realm of law.”

Kru tapped her chin, “Well, that’s certainly generous. But I really don’t you like it.”

“Name it now, or later.” The Queen replied.

Kru grinned, “Well, I’ll be nice. Once I’ve done your little quest of alchemy... You’ll join me here, for a drink.”

The Queen turned a distinct shade of white, peering at the ale in Kru’s glass dubiously, “Eugh.”

Kru raised an eyebrow, “That’s my price.”

“Fine.” The Queen sighed, standing up, “Once you’ve assisted.”

Kru nodded, “Yep. And also once I’ve finished this drink.”

The Queen looked at her in perplexity, “Casting requires concentration. I cannot afford to have you get drunk.”

Kru held out a hand, an endless stream of gold coins spilling from it as she skulled her drink. The Queen’s eyes widened more and more as Kru tipped her head back slowly.

She gasped air and slammed the tankard on the table.

The Queen sighed, “I guess not.”

Kru stood up, stretching, and then glared around the room, “Any of you touch the gold, and I’ll put gold where it don’t shine.”

She turned her head to the barkeep, “It’s yours.”

The Queen shrugged, “Weird. But I’ll enforce it.”

The other adventurers turned away, muttering angrily. They might not be the cream of the crop, but no elf would raise a hand against their Queen. The Guardian wouldn’t let them live to sundown.

Elin

Elin couldn't relax, no matter how nice the water felt against her bark. Mostly because she wasn't sure what was water, and what was Kao. The goddess had melted into the hot water, and had grinned right at her an instant before her face had vanished.

She looked over nervously at the others in the water, hoping one of them would reassure her.

The Fate was relaxed, spread and floating.

The other was more modest, but easily as relaxed. They smiled at her, and said something entirely not reassuring. "Kao's just waiting for an opportunity to play with you."

Elin twitched, creaking loudly.

Yio laughed from where she was floating, "Kao finds modesty... Interesting. She'll probably just try and kiss you."

Elin moaned, a strange guttural sound. She looked around nervously, and pulled her knees up to her chin.

As she did, she realised her mistake. She'd left herself more exposed by the motion, or at least her bare cheeks. Something firm gripped her instantly. Elin squealed and leapt out of the water, glaring at a face that poked up and out of where she had been, laughing at her.

Elin wished she could talk. So she could yell and scream at the invasion of privacy.

Or just plain invasion.

Yio sat up, yawning, "Okay, Kao, that's enough."

The goddess blubbered into the water with disappointment, and Yio glared, "Do you want me to freeze you solid? And let a goblin slobber over you?"

Kao popped upright, solid again, "I get the point you were trying to make. But just so you know, that isn't entirely unappealing."

"Gross." Yio shuddered and floated up to the surface again, "She'll behave Elin."

Elin glared, keeping an eye on the goddess and she slid back into the water.

She sighed, trying to slow her breathing down, to relax into the water.

She was supposed to be practising.

Words of power. Words you felt within yourself that had the power to change the world. Perhaps that's why her people had spoken so little when she was a child. If speaking could change the world, she doubted she would feel the need to say anything at all.

E'lani.

It was her name. It meant her... But what did she mean?

She wasn't sure who she was. A mass murderer? A serial killer? She wasn't the defender of the forest. She was just some lost animal that the forest had welcomed in, as it did for everyone. She wasn't a part of the ecosystem, she was an invasive species.

Entrins. Everyone hated them. Generations before her, they'd been monsters that deserved the title. World conquerors. Her ancestors had tried to eliminate all the dwellers. Even the name, it meant something less than the forest. Something that wasn't part of the cycle of life and death, just something that took and took and never gave back.

Yet these dwellers... They guided reality. A Fate, a goddess of chaos, and... And something she wasn't quite sure about, to be honest.

Yio had called her a Protoanimarum. As if that was actually a word that held meaning.

The woman looked... For the most part, human. There were small differences. Like the furry ears sticking out of the top of her head, or the hints of nearly invisible feathers by her elbows. There wasn't any other obvious difference, apart from her knowing the celestials. It likely meant that she was far older than she looked, but that wasn't a question you could ask in polite company.

Yio laughed, "Wintry, Elin's thinking about you."

Elin looked away nervously, and heard the woman's voice, "Oh sweetie. That's normal. I'm the only one of my kind."

The Entrin perked up, looking over anxiously. The only one left. She knew that kind of crushing despair. The loneliness.

"I caused the death of my race." Wintry shrugged, "All of them. Executed for my crimes."

Elin's jaw dropped. Maybe they weren't so similar.

The woman sighed, "It's a long story. But... I kinda took out my anger at Kao'el on all the celestials, leading to the war where my kind tried to, well, kill them all. Damn nearly succeeded to, until Kao'el showed up."

Elin felt the thought land like a brick and her eyes widened, staring at the woman in horror.

Kao waved, "Ooh! I know that face! She gets it!"

Elin glared at the woman who had violated her angrily, and then looked back inquisitively at Wintry, and she nodded, "Yeah. That's what the proto in the name is for. My people were the First People. And I was the one who made the First Sin."

The Entrin blanched.

Kao drifted passed Elin to Wintry, wrapping herself around her and kissing her cheek, "Hey. You don't need to feel like that. It's been ages since then. Literally."

Wintry sighed and shrugged, "It's true, though."

Kao nuzzled her cheek, trying to make her smile.

Elin smiled weakly at her, she didn't want to see her hurt, no matter what her past was.

Wintry waved a hand around, "But now, I run this place. I don't get many guests, but that is the point. I don't wish to be visited by every elf in the forest."

Elin held a hand and motioned towards her mouth.

"Eat?" Wintry frowned, "Oh. What do I do for food? That's easy. I'm a First. Any tree will yield any kind of fruit I wish. The ground will grow a seed overnight if I request it. I'm pretty self-sustaining out here."

Yio laughed, "She's being modest, Elin. Her kind are magic. Compared to them, the Fae are toying with building blocks."

Elin frowned, not quite understanding.

"Most races have an affinity for magic, but only a kind or two." Wintry explained, "But my kind, we're the progenitors of magic. We literally stole it from the gods. untainted, and pure, not watered down. And me... Well, I'm the first woman who stole magic."

Elin blinked slowly, and nodded. So this woman had the power of a god. That explained a lot about how she was able to survive in this part of the forest, alone and by herself.

“Being modest again.” Kao smiled, kissing her cheek, “That’s what I love about you. She stole half my magic, Elin.”

Her yellow eyes opened as wide as they could go, and a soft keening noise escaped her mouth, as she looked at the two of them. Stolen half suggested that the goddess that terrified all the other gods only had half left.

Which meant this creature that seemed so human was in fact also one of the most powerful creatures in existence, and might possibly be tied for most powerful.

That was a truly terrifying thought.

“I lost most of it when I died, Kao’el, baby.” Wintry said, and shrugged, “Not that I need much power out here. Worst thing to hit me in the last thousand years was some drake attack. I think it was even a youngling.”

Elin leaned forward, wanting to know more about this heroic event, this event that might even be said to be cataclysmic.

“I just fed it a feast, and it decided it didn’t need to eat me.” Wintry shrugged, “Still comes and visits every hundred years or so.”

She befriended... A drake. One of the fiercest, angriest creatures that could be found in the entire realm.

No wonder she liked the goddess of chaos.

Yio sat up, stretching, “Well, I guess Elin and I will give you two some privacy.”

Wintry blinked, “Say again?”

“She’s begging to make out with you.” Yio laughed, stepping out of the water, “Come on, Elin, there’s another pool down this way.”

Kao

She smiled sheepishly as the other two disappeared into the mist, and reached up, stroking one of Wintry's ears.

The woman blushed, "Really? Yio was right?"

Kao kissed her cheek, "Really? You didn't notice?"

Wintry fidgeted nervously, "You've never brought guests over before. I figured you wouldn't try anything."

Kao kissed her cheek, and shifted so she was sitting over her lap, legs around her waist, "Are you kidding? This means things are getting serious. I'm introducing you to my friends."

Wintry pouted, "Stop it. I know you like my body, and I'm fine with that, but... Don't say things like that. Don't get a girl's hopes up."

Kao smiled sadly and raised her chin, "I'm not. I... I've never resurrected anyone else, Wintry. I've never broken the rules for anyone else. I know I can't have you. Your existence is a crime. If I did what I wanted to do, then every celestial in the verse would try and cut off your head."

She felt Wintry's heartrate raise from their touching chests, and kissed her forehead, "I mean every word."

"Then say it." Wintry complained.

Kao struggled not to grin as she looked at that pouting face. She wondered how far she could push the teasing. "Say what?"

Wintry shook her head, looking somewhere between mad and on the verge of tears.

Kao winced, "Sorry. I love you, Wintry."

The woman went stiff, as if she was in shock. As if she'd never thought that Kao would say those words.

"Wintry, I love you."

Two hands raised slowly and grabbed the sides of her head, Wintry seemed as if she was about to explode in terror, curling her fists up in her own hair. The woman bit her lower lip, trying not to cry.

Kao winced, "I'm sorry."

She turned to drift away, when solid arms wrapped around her waist, "Give me a godsdamned minute!"

Kao twisted back, looking into her eyes, and the protoanimarium sighed heavily, "Just processing. I never thought we could be together. And we still bloody can't. But now I get to want you to, instead."

She sighed heavily, "If it means anything, Wintry, I'm not just in Eldrasa for a day this time."

"Yio's thread." Wintry replied tightly, "It has to be broken. They all do."

Kao frowned, "What do you know of that?"

"Oh just what I could pull out of Yio's mind. She was just so relaxed, it was too tempting." The woman grinned, her ears twitching.

Kao kissed her nose quickly, "That's my girl. Yes. It's worse than Yio knows, though."

“Usually is.” Wintry shrugged, “At least if it gets your attention.”

Kao laughed, “Possibly. Now, I think Yio was giving us a moment. But only a moment.”

Wintry traced the goddess cheek, “Well, then. I guess I need to try and be quiet.”

Wintry

She bit her lip to stop from moaning, and Kao leaned in, whispering in her ear, “So have you had many customers whilst I’ve been away?”

Wintry swallowed, trying to keep quiet as the goddess shifted her grip. So they were playing this game then. She could play as well. She bent down, kissing Kao’s neck gently, “A few. One or two a month.”

She lifted her head, her teeth brushing the edge of Kao’s ear gently, “Some of them have been kind. Others wanted more than I sell.”

The teasing worked. Kao gently flicked something sensitive, and Wintry’s whole body stiffened for a moment, and she couldn’t help herself, letting out a slow and soft sound of unadulterated pleasure. The goddess kissed her gently, “I’m sorry to hear that. Did anyone cause problems?”

Wintry grinned, her eyes lighting up for a brief moment, causing the water around Kao to grip her tightly, squeezing her everywhere at once, “Oh, not so much.”

Kao groaned, glaring at her, as Wintry’s hand moved south, “Good to hear.”

Wintry twisted them around, pinning the goddess up against the edge of the spring, kissing her frantically, unable to resist it anymore. Kao teased her, pushing her down slowly, “I got invited to a wedding.”

“I heard.” She replied jealously, softly stroking the length of the channel, “Did you bring anyone with you?”

Kao was turning a darker colour, struggling to keep the game going, “Uh. I didn’t. I... Uhm. I went alone. Uhm. But I did meet someone.”

Wintry bit her neck gently, and Kao’s hands gripped against her. The goddess was going to lose this one.

She was going to be the first one to squeal.

Kyrus

Kyrus swept the last of the coins into the sack, and stretched his back.

He looked at the pile of gold uncertainly. It wasn't that he was ungrateful to Kru. She might have done it as a show of power, but she'd also done it for him. But he really didn't need it. He lived fairly modestly, and he was paid well enough by the customers, and the guild that paid him to put up the wanted posters.

He picked up the sack slowly, and hefted it over his shoulder. He glanced over at the only customer still hanging around, one of the older veterans. "You be right if I head out for a bit?"

The man held up a full tankard, "Aye. Temple, is it?"

Kyrus nodded, waving as he headed out the door. He walked down the street, watching the elfin around him. Some knew him, and quickly started moving in a different direction. Others saw what he was carrying, and stopped to stare, but for the most part nobody even noticed him.

He was just another elf, in a city of elfin.

He stopped outside the temple gates, looking up at the intimidating white pillars, breathing slowly. It had been years, but every time he came here, he couldn't forget that first day. The day he'd arrived, bloodied and beaten, and been thrown at the mercy of those inside. Those who devoted their lives to caring for the sick and the poor.

He walked inside slowly, glancing over as he saw the Guardian already standing there. She was watching him, foot tapping impatiently.

Kyrus sighed, wandering over, "You've been expecting me."

"Queen mentioned it." The Guardian sneered, "Don't be so proud. You don't matter to me. What matters is that the queen promised the Fae the gold would go to you. So if you want it to come here, then I have to make sure distribution happens, and corruption doesn't. So thanks for ruining my day."

Kyrus rolled his eyes, looking over as one of the sister's approached him, "Brother Kyrus. We weren't expecting you for another week."

"I've had a bit of a windfall." He smiled at her, and nodded at the Guardian, "She's here to help."

The sister looked at the Guardian in surprise, "Madame Algar. It has been many years."

"Not long enough." Afiti replied and then sighed, "A Fae gave him some gold. Why's he donating it to you?"

Kyrus sighed, "I was near dead at the end of the last war, Guardian. These people cared for me. They do good work, I saw it first hand. I help when I can."

The Guardian rolled her eyes, "How much did the Fae give you, anyway?"

Kyrus frowned, "We should go to a counter, sister. Maybe even the treasury one."

The sister suddenly blinked, "Is that whole sack, gold?"

The Guardian laughed, "'Course it is."

The three headed upstairs, and the sister began the meticulous task of counting and checking the coins for purity. Kyrus knew they'd all be pure. It was what the Fae did. He waited patiently, quietly. Same couldn't be said for the Guardian.

“You know, all of this, helping these people, it doesn’t make up for what you did.”

He looked at her tiredly, and the Guardian continued, “I know your crimes, oathbreaker. I know exactly what you did. The people you killed. I know their names. Do you? Do you even care? None of this makes up for what you’ve done.”

“You’re right.” He replied, “I know it doesn’t. Nothing ever will. That’s not why I do it. I do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

He turned back to the counting, “Nothing will ever make up for what I’ve done, Guardian. Not ever. I’m not that stupid.”

Yio

She was trying very hard to pretend she was deaf.

It wasn't something that Yio had thought about before. She knew that Kao was a player, that she enjoyed wrapping herself around the various people she'd stumbled across throughout her indefinitely long lifespan. Yet, she'd always figured that the goddess had been like her, that love wasn't something either of them had ever experienced. It seemed like Kao really did understand.

She couldn't be with Wintry, not openly. In secret it could be tolerated.

Every few hundred years.

Yio could barely stand the weeks she'd been apart from Trei, her heart ached. Every moment felt worse and worse, and she craved him more and more. Craved the thought of being held. Of him resting his chin on her shoulder.

She had now idea how Kao managed to stay away for as long as she did.

Yio sank into the water up to her nose, blowing bubbles quietly. It did however, seem like those two knew how to make the best of the short time they had together.

The Fate paused, looking over at her companion. The woman was trying her best to wear any expression at all, but she was clearly not relaxing into the moment. Trying to enjoy this place and time.

Elin deserved to enjoy herself, after everything she had been through.

Yio sighed and held up her hand, glancing around for a moment before a burst of magic shot outwards around them. It wasn't technically breaking any rules, but it came close to it. She suggested strongly to the air that it should change direction as it came close to the pool they were in, cancelling out the soundwaves that it was carrying.

Elin looked at her curiously, and Yio shrugged, "Yeah. I'm not really supposed to do that kind of magic. Not without the others agreeing, anyway."

The Entrin smiled softly, and Yio could see the frustration in those eyes of her.

It had to be hard, not being able to speak, relying on others to guess your intentions.

Yio shrugged, wrapping around her legs as she sat in the water, "Remember, E'lani. That's the word. Your word."

The woman ran a hand through her hair sheepishly, shrugging. Yio sighed and pushed off over to her, sitting beside her, and placing an arm around her shoulders, "You don't know who you are?"

She nodded stiffly.

Yio shrugged, "I don't know who I am. I really don't. I'm a Fate. I'm a woman. I like teasing people. I... Revere, justice. But none of that tells me who I am, not really. Who I am is... Me. There isn't a word to describe it, except one. I am Yio."

The Entrin looked at her surprised, and the Fate shrugged, "We are all who we are. There's no great secret or understanding. It takes a lifetime to know yourself, and when you do, that lifetime is over. It isn't possible to know yourself, not fully. You can guess, but every now and then... You'll surprise yourself. You'll be surprised that your stronger, or that you can cope better with something than you thought. You can't know your limits until you go beyond them."

The woman nodded tiredly, and Yio squeezed her shoulder, "You are... Elin. That's all that

matters.”

“E’lani.” A voice whispered in the air, and Yio broke out into a broad smile, “I heard that.”

She clapped her hands together excitedly, grabbing Yio’s hands and staring at her. The voice was quiet, as if it wasn’t quite there. As if it were nothing more than a breeze moving through the forest. If you weren’t listening for it, you would miss it. “E’lani.”

Yio grinned at her, “Yep. That’s you. The mighty E’lani.”

The woman raised an eyebrow, suddenly going dubious, and Yio shrugged, “What? You don’t think of yourself that way?”

Elin shook her head quickly. Yio shrugged, “Agree to disagree. You’ve lived through a lot. That deserves respect. E’lani the survivor. E’lani the unkillable.”

The woman rolled her eyes, and then relaxed into the water, floating slowly, staring up at the sky.

Yio could feel the relief rolling off her, even if her aura hadn’t been a flashing mess of colours. She wondered if she’d ever feel that at peace.

She had come here to try and relax.

Instead she was jealous of a goddess who rarely got to see her girlfriend, and might have to watch her die if she hung out with her too much. She was jealous of a tree who was still a child inside. Never had a chance to grow up properly, to see the world as it was.

She was angry at a man for falling in love.

Yio moved into a corner, tilting her head back and trying to pretend she wasn’t crying yet again. She couldn’t help it. She was broken. Shattered. Her world had been torn to pieces. She almost felt as if she’d died, and entered her own personal purgatory. Hopes and dreams had crashed to the ground. This world wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t kind. She couldn’t see a point of it right now.

Her soul had literally been sheared.

A piece of her would always be carried with Trei, even if he never realised it. Even if he never turned around and tried to do the same for her. It wasn’t something that could be fixed. It wasn’t something that could be reversed. Not everything that had been broken could be repaired.

Everyone lies to themselves. Tells themselves it isn’t as bad as it is. That they’ll move on, find someone else.

It’s a lie.

Every love is different. Every time it feels different. And every time it hurts just as badly as before, or worse.

That’s just love.

Yio curled up her hands into fists, wanting to punch and break something. She wasn’t in love. She wasn’t infatuated. She had imprinted, she had been bound forever. Her soul didn’t know a difference between itself and him anymore.

She held up her left hand out the water, looking at the tiny red thread wrapped around her thread. She glared at it, wishing it would break.

Her mind was fixated on one of two solutions. Neither of which she actually wanted.

Either the cord would break, or she would die.

That was the only way out of this.

“Stop it.”

Yio blinked, looking at a dripping, angry and naked woman leaning over her, arms on her hips.

Wintry glared down at her, “Those aren’t the kind of thoughts you need.”

Yio shrugged, dropping her arm into the water with a splash, “And?”

Wintry slid into the water beside her, wrapping a leg around her, “Yio. You’re important. That means you don’t get to just give up.”

“Screw you.” Yio retorted.

She heard a laugh, and Kao bobbed out of the water, “I already did that. Sorry.”

Yio tried very hard not to laugh as she saw Elin turn a darker shade, completely embarrassed by the goddess’ freedom to admit what they had just been doing.

Wintry tapped her chin, “I might let you. If that would distract you.”

Yio turned up her nose and pushed her old friend away, “Ew. No.”

Wintry laughed and shrugged, “Come on, Yio. We’re all here for you. This is your camping trip. Do you have to sit there and sulk?”

“Yes.” Yio snapped angrily, bursting instantly into tears, “I don’t have a fucking choice, Wintry! I have tried, and I have tried! I can’t forget him. I can’t move on. I can’t even feel happy anymore. I get a moment, just a moment, to touch the damn emotions you all seem to enjoy, and then I’m back to despair. There’s no moving on from this. I can’t do it. It isn’t possible. I can’t just will myself better.”

“I know.” Wintry replied quietly, “That’s sort of the point, Yio. No one can, not by themselves. That’s why you’re surrounded by friends.”

Yio sighed, “Do any of you really understand, though?”

“I guess it’s time then.”

Yio glanced at Kao who was busy making Elin nervous with a shoulder massage, “You feel alone, right, Yio? Then you need to go talk to her.”

“Who?”

Wintry rolled her eyes, “Who else? Alphege.”

“She’s dying.” Yio sighed, “In stasis. Waking her would kill her.”

Kao shrugged, “That’s sort of why I convinced Kru to come to this realm. She’s the key to helping Alphege. Just like bringing you to Eldrasa wasn’t just a whim. You need to talk to someone who is going through what you have.”

Kru

The Fae frowned as she entered the room. It was pristine, filled with light. The walls were covered with creepers, growing up and out, spreading across the entire ceiling, sprinkling green dust lightly across the entire space. There were white pillars, adorned with gold and silver.

In the centre of the room lay a stone slab, and on it was an elfin figure she recognised all too well. A woman she had last seen dying by Claven's hand. A warrior who had shocked her with speed and strength, moving as one with a dark wooden spear. No one would have stood much chance against her, except that Claven had been half crazy and blood drunk at the time.

Now here she was, about to save that monster's life.

She smiled and leaned against one of the pillar's waiting for the elf in the white coat to notice her arrival as he dashed around, cursing at every instrument he picked up, desperately trying some sort of alchemical formula. He seemed to be getting more and more anxious, and more and more frustrated. From what she could see, the vast bulk of what he was trying to make was charcoal based, but required the utmost purity, otherwise the compound would begin to break down, turning mostly to stale air.

He slammed his fists on a desk in frustration, rattling the array of alchemical glass tools, "It has to be more pure!"

She rolled her eyes, "The queen heard you, idiot."

The man froze and turned slowly, looking at her in surprise, "A Fae... How long have you been there?"

"Your queen is paying me." She shrugged, "Long enough to watch you fail. How've you been making the charcoal?"

The man paused, "She didn't mention it to me."

Kru shrugged, "Not really my problem. I can go if you want. Not like I want to help her."

The elf glanced to the stone slab, as if remembering why he was working, "Oh. Why did the queen send you?"

"To make pure forms of the ingredients you might need." Kru shrugged, "I'm guessing charcoal is the first. Well, not even charcoal, is it. You want black charcoal. Pure is easy for me, complex, not so much. Okay?"

The elf sighed, "Okay... Yes, I've found a medicine of sorts in nature, I'm fairly certain I have the formula, and I want to synthesise it, because I need vast quantities. Bonded coal is the primary ingredient."

"How much?" Kru raised an eyebrow, and the elf frowned, "You can really fetch me bonded coal?"

"Not fetch." She replied with distaste, "It's a pure element. Made of six fragments. So manufacturing it is dead simple for a Fae. I am Fae. So, again, how much?"

The alchemist shrugged, "I need probably a tenth weight whilst I try and get everything lined up."

Kru walked over next to him and sighed, "Fine. A tenth to begin with."

She slammed her palm on the table and lifted her hand slowly. The silvery black stone appearing beneath it. She sighed and stepped back, crossing her arms, "What's next?"

The man stared in shock, “What? That’d take one of our mages a month to build.”

“I’m Fae.” She growled angrily, “I’ve already told you that.”

He turned, “Look, I do understand the queen doesn’t always tell me everything. But why would a Fae help an elf?”

“I’m exiled.” She replied, and smiled tightly, “For treason. I’m banished from my world. A lot of thanks actually goes to that dying guardian over there. Your queen has threatened to expel me, kill me, and other things. She is paying me, and I like the carrot a lot better than the stick, but I’m not here to be your friend. You don’t have to trust me. Check the purity yourself, if you call yourself an alchemist.”

He smiled tightly, “I was going to. So the queen sends me an oathbreaker. Strange.”

Kru rolled her eyes, sitting on the bench idly, “Let me know when you need me again.”

The elf took a sample and began to process it, breaking it down and watching a series of reactions in different vials. “I say strange, Fae, because I am also an oathbreaker. It seems the plight of this elf has the royalty forgiving the unforgivable.”

“We’re not bonding.” Kru yawned, “I helped lead a rebellion in a people where violence is anathema. I know I’m a monster. I don’t want to know what kind of monster you are.”

“Not a monster, as such.” The alchemist replied, “Though some certainly see it that way. As a state-certified alchemist, there are certain rules you have to agree to. Some of them are quite archaic, and I disagreed with them. I broke one of the rules. That makes me an oathbreaker. So I was condemned to death. In fact, I’d been waiting to die for three years before the queen asked for my help. In exchange for a partial pardon.”

Kru laughed, “Partial?”

“Reduction from death to life sentence.” He replied and shrugged, “Not much, but I’d be insane not to take the offer.”

Kru rolled her eyes, “You came cheap. Hope your magic isn’t as crap.”

The alchemist shrugged and then stood upright, “Well, I wonder how much you cost. This is pure.”

“Pure is easier.” Kru replied, and then shrugged, “Am I going to be here long?”

The alchemist walked back over and sketched a formula on the table with some chalk, “This is what I’m trying to make.”

“Charcoal, bits of air, and... What’s this one?”

The elf nodded, “That’s flame salts.”

Kru shook her head, “You can’t combine these in their pure form. Half will explode the moment they come in contact.”

The alchemist shrugged, “I know. I only need the bonded coal to be pure.”

“I only do pure.” Kru growled, “I told her that.”

The elf smiled, “I’m sure the queen nodded. But she barely understands alchemy at a rudimentary level.”

“Screw it.” Kru said, dropping off the table, “I don’t want to be here. Sooner we’re done, sooner I can leave. So shut up, and let me concentrate.”

“What?”

She ignored him.

The formula was difficult. It involved five separate elements, in perfect balance with each other. The quantities weren't small either. The balance had to be perfect, or this would rebound, and she'd ended up with a giant funnel of burning gas exploding in her face.

Kru clapped her hands together in front of her briefly, feeling the spark of red dust, and then she let the magic flow.

She winced, trying to keep everything together. The shapes took form, driven by her will.

Her anger.

Kru ground her fangs together as she felt part of the spell beginning to bend, to shift. She pushed it aside, feeling a brief wave of heat as it exploded beside her. She ignored it, had to ignore it. She need her entire focus on the spell at hand. Under whatever this was.

“What is it supposed to be?” She growled, “I need an image. An idea.”

“A salt!” The alchemist spoke from somewhere a little more distant than she'd expected, “It's white. Small and bitter.”

Kru furrowed her brow as she arrange the structures in place to accommodate the new information.

She sighed heavily suddenly, and dropped backwards as the sand spilled out of the air she'd been pushing against. She hit the marble tiles hard enough to slam her jaw shut, but she was too tired to react. Her eyes closed without her intervention, and she felt her heart still accelerating.

Maybe it hadn't been wise to attempt this whilst still tipsy.

Elin

She hadn't wanted to go with the Fate, not into the city.

Neither however had she felt like staying at the hot springs much longer. These people had welcomed her in with open arms, so easily. Yet she was not yet accustomed to them. She had retreated back to the campsite, or close to it. She was sitting against a tree, a small distance from the quarry, listening to one of the young trees, trying to calm it.

The creature had stumbled across the campsite, and was filled with terror.

It had felt the presence of a god, even if it didn't know to express the idea. Energy like nothing it had ever felt. Power and magic beyond what it could comprehend. She knew the feeling well. These women all acted as if they were nothing but normal individuals. They laughed, loved, and got jealous.

Yet Elin had seen their auras. Felt their lifeforce.

Each one of them was capable of destroying the entire forest without putting conscious effort into it. They were walking weapons of mass destruction. She had already seen how quickly angered Kao was. It did not take much imagination to think out the scenario where the goddess took out her anger in a vindictive swell of unstoppable force. She would be cruel, and slow to calm.

She wouldn't destroy this realm. She would curse it.

F'rir would rise up to defend her realm and be instantly killed.

Yio might try and save them.

She, too, would fail.

Kao was the end-all of disaster scenarios. There was no one alive who could threaten her existence. If she decided that something needed to happen, then it would be done. There was no reasoning with someone like that. There was no last minute brilliant strategy against them.

Even if someone learned of the weakness, of Wintry, and attacked her and held her to ransom, that would only make Kao more dangerous. They would be unable to protect their prisoner. Kao would free her instantly, and turn an even greater rage against the perpetrator.

All the realms only continued to exist because Kao allowed it.

Elin didn't know how or why Kao thought she could have friends. There was no friendship with someone who could undo your existence from start to finish without blinking. Friendship requires trust and equality. There was no trusting Kao, because she had no equal. None.

Even the woman who loved her had tolerated her indiscretions, because she had no other option.

The Entrin sighed, looking at the panicked tree. She didn't have anything she could say that would calm it. No reassuring feelings, no thoughts of a better future. It was right to be afraid of Kao.

Kao

She breathed out heavily, holding the woman in her arms gently. She didn't want the moment to end.

All things end.

She knew that better than anyone.

Wintry raised a hand, grabbing one of her hairs, "You are not about to disappear."

Kao laughed, "That wouldn't stop me."

"I know." Wintry pouted.

The goddess sighed, "I don't like leaving you. You know that, don't you?"

"And the goddess of chaos can sneak away for a camping trip with a Fate, but not turn up for me. Not for more than a few hours every few hundred years."

Kao winced at the pain she heard there, "It isn't like that. There's differences this time around. A lot of them."

"That you won't tell me."

Kao leaned forward, "That's one of the differences. I can. But I don't think you'll like what I have to say."

Wintry craned her neck, "Love means more than just pleasure. If there's something wrong, I want to know it."

Kao kissed her cheek, and leaned back, "There was a human. He became a god, recently."

"Trei." Wintry replied, "The chatter of the realms."

"That's not his name, not the one he was born with anyway." Kao replied, "His name was Trei'el."

The white-haired woman stiffened, her ears flying upright, "His mother knew he would become a god?"

"No." Kao replied, "She thought he would kill them. It was what he was made for. Created by a wizard, for one express purpose. The destruction of all the gods. It even worked, to some extent. He brought down Summer, and Tyr killed her. Destroyed the lifestream itself."

Wintry flinched, shivering.

"Trei brought it all back." Kao scoffed, "He resurrected the people he cared about as well. Even the bloody assassin. That was his moment of ascension. When he realised he was a celestial. That reality can be rewritten to fit your whims."

"That's not... A great start."

Kao smiled, "Understatement. It gets worse. Trei is now stronger than me. Not because he's somehow become as strong as me, but because he's rewritten the gods."

Wintry turned, looking at her in horror, "You're getting weaker?"

"Sort of." Kao gestured to herself, "This physical form? It's mine. Actually mine. I have a physical form, Wintry. I can't be everywhere at once now. Which means, I can't be the chaos in everywhere anymore. Chaos is becoming it's own thing. Dropping me. Letting go of me."

The woman spun around in the water, grabbing her hands, “You’re losing your divinity.”

“Yes.” Kao said, fighting back frightened tears, “Trei’el is the new head of a new order of gods. Every one of us is losing our divinity. Yio included. The power will choose someone else. We’ll fade into the background.”

“Are you going to die?” Wintry asked, panic written into every feature.

Kao shrugged, “I’m the first god. The first. There’s never been another me before. I made the other gods from my essence. They share whatever fate I have. For the first time, I might have a fate. An end. I am the embodiment of eternity... Or I was.”

She stopped, unable to keep talking.

She’d never been this afraid before.

Never been afraid, except to tell Wintry how she felt.

Wintry crushed her hands in her grip, “Whatever happens, if anyone can get through this, it’s you.”

Kao shook her head, “I can’t even affect what’s happening to me. But it isn’t happening to you. And it won’t. The world isn’t ending. New gods are coming. You, here, so far from the world. You will always be safe. And that’s enough.”

Wintry glared at her, “It isn’t enough for me.”

Kao shrugged, “And that’s why I’m helping Yio out.”

Wintry blinked, “Oh. Oh that’s just plain mean. The only way to break Yio’s tie to Trei, that stupid little red thread, is to take her power. Make her fall. Lose her divinity.”

Kao shrugged sheepishly, “And when she does, I’ll follow.”

Wintry shook her head, “Isn’t it just a tad mean to use your friend as an experiment?”

“I haven’t lied to her.” Kao replied, “I haven’t told her the full scope yet. Sarin already suspects it. She’s preparing for a war. F’rir knows what’s coming. It’s why she’s hiding out in Eldrasa. There’s a number of other gods who are preparing. Everyone is waiting. Waiting to see what I do. They all want to fight Trei and whoever comes after him.”

She paused, frowning, “The only way out, that I can see, is making Yio into a symbol. That losing her divinity doesn’t make her weak, doesn’t make her vulnerable. It makes her free.”

Wintry shook her head, “And you think this will work?”

“It has once already.” Kao smiled softly, “Sumner sacrificed herself, and her divinity, to create the Fae. Summer is no celestial, but she equal standing. She lives with her people, fights with her people. She has my respect, and the respect of everyone else. She’s what we all need to become, if we are to survive. The humans created a legend once. A man called Hero. To them, he was made by the gods, and carried out their crusade with untold power and strength. In truth, he was mortal and nothing more. But the idea of it... The old gods will become the ones who send heroes, and stay and protect their people. We may lose our strength, but every one of us has knowledge of magic that no one else has.”

Wintry raised an eyebrow, “What about you? You never had a realm. You made everything. So who are you going to protect?”

“I was thinking I could retire.” Kao grinned, “I was thinking of you. Thinking I might be able to go wherever you go.”

The ears on top of her went flat, “Don’t lie. Not right now.”

“I was thinking all the others would murder me before the week is out.” Kao said heavily.

Wintry winced, “Well. You were right. I don’t like it.”

Wintry

She was lying, curled up in her bed. Nearby she could hear Kao blubbing away, sleeping.

Normally she'd find the sound comforting, and would drift off instantly.

Not today. Not after the whirlwind of things that had hit her.

She didn't even know where to begin. It was just like Kao to do this to her. To confess her love and then drop that every realm was now under the threat of war the likes of which had never been seen before. The gods were preferring to wage war. The last time that had happened the whole of reality had been so badly damaged that they hadn't been able to stitch it back together correctly.

There was nothing that she could do about it, not really. She might be a magic user, and powerful at that, but she wasn't a celestial. She couldn't hit them until they started acting sensibly. Couldn't force them to start planning a peaceful transition.

Everyone was afraid of the unknown. That the new gods were unknown, and could come from anywhere or might even be new forces brought into being... That was the epitome of fear. No one knew who was coming, or what they would be like. The instability wasn't a fear that anyone could cure.

Except one.

Trei was the key to it all, in a way. He had defined how the new gods would behave, and he was the new head of this pantheon. Probably. She guessed that no one could really know if he would be the head at the end of the day. Kao had been, because she was the strongest. Yet Trei might be the first, but not necessarily the strongest. In fact strength might not be the most important feature of a god that chose to live amongst his people.

Wintry sighed, and stood up, walking over to the window, looking out through the glass at the bright light of the moon. It had always given her hope in her darkest hour. The light of the gods shining down on everyone, sinner and saint alike. Everyone had the hope of a new morning, a new beginning. Even her. The first among the worst. The worlds had been torn apart by her actions. The gods had fought their words because of her. Every species that now existed was because she had lead her own people into genocide.

She leaned her head against the cold glass.

She could remember their names, their faces. Every one she had ever known. Beautiful men and wonderful women. Powerful soldiers and terrified orphans. They each had their dreams of a better tomorrow. They'd all believed her when she said she would bring it to them. She'd come back from the gods with power no one had ever imagined. She'd cured the sick, raised the dead. She'd eliminated hunger, and brought equality where there had been none.

It wasn't enough for her. She had to save the whole world.

So she took what wasn't hers, fashioning it into a rationalisation for war. Created a tool of destruction that had never been equalled. Every race feared the horrors of war, and rightfully so. It was the inevitable end from that moment. She wasn't just a thief. That had been the first sin, but it led so quickly to the second. Once you have power, you have to protect it.

Her brother had tried to seize her power for himself.

Wintry felt a single tear fall, splashing silently on the floor by her feet.

Instantly she felt warm arms around her waist. She smiled sadly, "I'm okay."

“Memories?”

She smiled sadly, “I was remembering that day.”

Kao didn’t say anything, just holding her tight. She didn’t need to say any more than that. There was no other day that hurt as much as that one. The day she’d murdered her brother in front of all her people, and they had cheered her on. The mentality of the mob, the anger of the crowd. It rose up, protecting her from realising what she had done until she was alone.

The music had gone out of her life that day.

She’d turned away from Kao, rejecting her outright. She had pushed away from her people, dwelling quietly alone in her castle. She’d spent her days killing and fighting, and her nights sharpening her sword. Life ceased to have value. Pleasure turned to ash in her mouth. It didn’t matter if it was food, or men and women. Nothing brought happiness to her.

She had become everything she believed herself to be.

She’d never felt anything at all. Life was empty and meaningless.

She lost the war, years later. Decades.

She accepted her fate without reservation. She’d thought she felt regret, but that would require feeling something.

Wintry smiled sadly, looking up at the moon.

It was the first thing she’d seen when she woke up. The night sky overhead, in that freezing clearing in the forest. She could hear the buzz of insects, and the calls of the animals in the trees all around her.

And then she’d seen why she was alive.

She saw Kao leaning over her with a grin.

Wintry turned around, arms going around her waist and she smiled at the goddess who was watching her sadly. She kissed her nose playfully, “I’m okay, Kao.”

The goddess rolled her eyes, “No, you’re not. But that is okay.”

Wintry shrugged, “I’m hurting. I always will be. When you scar, it doesn’t go away. It’s just easier. I might not be a picture of perfection, or anything close to it, but all the same, Kao, I’m okay.”

The goddess smiled at her, touching her cheek softly, “That’s a mature perspective.”

“I’m hundreds of millions of years old. If that doesn’t come with maturity, what does?”

Kao grinned, “Well, I’m older. And if I ever do become an old hag, be sure to dump me, okay?”

Wintry rolled her eyes, and pecked her on the lips, “Never.”

The goddess pulled her tight against her, resting her chin on her shoulder, “You’re too good for me.”

“Pretty sure I’m the definition of evil in most cultures.” Wintry mused, “What does that say about us?”

“Nothing at all.” Kao smiled, pulling back.

Wintry turned back to the window, dragging one of Kao’s hands with her, “How do you think Yio is getting on?”

“She will have met Kru there.” Kao whispered, “Which probably means she knows something more than I’ve told her is happening. Hopefully neither of them did anything too stupid.”

Wintry turned around and shoved Kao backwards onto the bed angrily, “Screw it. You have absolutely nothing hopeful to say.”

Kao looked at her, half hurt.

Wintry sat across her waist, entwining her fingers and leaning down to playfully bite at Kao’s neck, “Distract me.”

Kyrus

He raised an eyebrow, looking at the elf leaning on the bar. If she kept this up, he'd start losing customers. Nobody liked having the strongest warrior in the land looking sideways at you, trying to guess how much your bounty might be worth.

Kyrus placed a warm mug beside her hand, "You going to keep this up much longer?"

"Until the Fae is dead or gone." She replied, picking up the warm cocoa, "Though, I wouldn't mind staying longer."

Kyrus rolled his eyes, counting the upheld hands and began pouring the ale. Now he was busy, the Guardian allowed herself a quiet sigh. Something about the cocoa he made was impacting her, making her feel sentimental.

He tried not to smile.

Alfiti was trying too hard to live up to the legend of her mother. Her mother had been uptight because she was uptight. It didn't suit the younger one. She'd still be an intimidating warrior if she allowed herself to relax a little. Heck, she might be more intimidating if she were friendly.

There was nothing quite like shaking the hand of someone you knew could kill you in a heartbeat.

"Guardian!" A guard called from the doorway.

Alfiti growled and turned, carefully placing the drink back on the bar. "The Fae is dying. You are needed in the palace."

Kyrus could imagine the curse words passing through the woman's head. The drink was about the only indulgence he'd ever seen her take. The Guardian left without a word, and without paying.

Neither was unusual. He'd take the decreased tension in the atmosphere as payment, happily.

If the Guardian had been called to help Kru, then Kru would survive. And she was more generous than anybody else he knew. Too generous, for the kind of person she was.

Yio

She sat calmly to the side, watching the group carefully.

There hadn't been many in the room when she first arrived. Just an idiot Fae who'd nearly burned herself out manufacturing medicine for an elf she cared absolutely nothing about. It hadn't taken long for her psychotic partner to return, having called for help. He was something that made Yio extremely nervous. His aura was that of someone who had done absolutely horrible things, and would again without hesitation. She could already see the death that was in store for him, it was close, and extremely violent.

Yio wasn't comfortable with the way he looked at her, as if deciding which parts of her would be best suited for amputation. As if wondering how much magic he could get if he ground her down. This was the sort of person who couldn't see the world for all the facts swirling around inside their insane heads. The hyper logical were one of the most dangerous breeds. For them, the ends always justified the means.

Shortly afterwards, the medic had arrived, with the queen and her entourage in tow.

Yio hadn't attempted to engage with any of them, sitting off to the side and watching. She was here to see Alphege, not all the people trying to save her life. A life she clearly didn't want to be saved.

F'rir had still hidden the truth, trying to protect Yio.

Alphege wasn't just dying. She wanted to die. That was why she wouldn't wake up. Why nothing that the Fates could do could draw her out of it. Why none of the alchemy or magic in the world would do anything at all. Alphege had already gone and died as far as the woman herself was concerned. She'd died, and was just waiting for her body to catch up with the truth, and free her from her prison of pain.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

Yio blinked, seeing the bowing and scraping elf for the first time. A people pleaser. The kind of hanger-on that royalty always invited. Probably a butler or announcer or something menial.

The elf bowed nervously, "The queen has requested your presence."

Yio flicked him in the face as she stood up, propelling him into the nearest pillar with a solid thud. She walked over as the soldiers drew their weapons fearfully. Yio ignored them, walking over to where Alphege lay dying, slowly. She examined her carefully, including the red thread still tied tightly around her wrist. Tighter than ever. Yio touched it softly, holding it up to the light and examining it.

"Madam Fate?"

Yio grunted an acknowledgement, but otherwise ignored the lyrical voice. She stretched out the thread, frowning. She could see something running along the length of it. Something that didn't belong. Nothing really belonged.

She twisted the thread tight, squeezing it.

A droplet of liquid fell, and Yio stepped back in horror, staring at it as it struck the tiles.

"What is -" Yio cut the soldier off with a punch to the face, "Back off you fools!"

The queen gestured and the soldiers retreated, but still kept pointing their weapons at her. The woman spoke nervously from a short distance away, "Was that blood?"

Yio gritted her teeth. She didn't understand how this had happened.

It shouldn't be able to happen.

Then again, more than one person had never latched on to the same soul before. When one thing became possible then others could as well.

Yio backed up, not daring to take her eyes off Alphege, "She's been cursed. I don't get this. F'rir should have seen it. Known it for what it is."

The queen swallowed, "A curse?"

"A great big illegal curse." Yio shivered, "A god has cursed her. Living just for Trei is a curse anyway, believe me, I know. But this... This is something else entirely. Something that should never have been allowed to happen. The curse is bleeding her dry. Stealing her life force, and using the thread of fate binding her to Trei as a carrier. It isn't going to him, he isn't the recipient. It's just a vulnerable entry point to her soul."

"Fate. Who could do this? I demand to know."

Yio laughed, "Demand, do you? I was going to tell you. But now, I don't know. It isn't like you could do anything about the curse, or me."

A soldier lunged, his sword glittering through the air as it headed for her. Yio stopped the blade with the tip of her finger, freezing it and the hands holding it. The knight yanked, staring in terror. Yio sighed heavily, "From what little I can glean, your majesty, Alphege has less than a day to live. She'll be dead soon. Burned out. The life sucked out of her soul... What happened? Why did she try and kill herself?"

"I assume the life debt she has to that monster." The queen said vaguely.

Yio sighed and blew a strand of her pink hair, "She didn't leave a note? And none of you found that odd?"

"Alphege has been strange since she returned to the realm." The queen shrugged, "Are you suggesting there is more to it?"

Yio nodded grimly, "This curse. Someone forced her to try and kill herself. Someone who had infected her with ancient power. Beyond ancient. There are few people who even know how to infect a soul, let alone with this sort of finesse. Someone tortured her into killing herself. They made everything worse. They took her pain and made it so great she had no choice. They still are. Trying to force her to give up living. F'rir should have seen this. She should have."

A tired croaking voice spoke up, "What makes you think she didn't?"

Yio smiled grimly, "The thought has crossed my mind, Kru of the Kruei."

"Stop calling me that!" The tired Fae snapped, "That part of my life is over!"

Yio shrugged, "I don't know about that."

The Fae grabbed her shoulders, trying to turn her. Yio resisted, "If I take my eyes off this curse, it'll attack everyone in the room. So please, don't."

She felt Kru take a nervous step backwards, and the Fae growled, "Why are you here, Fate? Why do you keep messing with me?"

"Mostly because Kao keeps putting you in my path." Yio yawned, "I'm guessing she thinks you're my type or something. Sorry, but your arrogance is downright unappealing. However, what I

meant this time, is that Alphege is important to Summer and Trei. If you help me save her, then I'm sure that they'll forgive you. If that is what you want."

Kru was silent. So then. The Fae really didn't want to be forgiven. She really was that broken. Punishing herself in excess of the punishments handed down to her by the very people she had hurt most.

Yio sighed, "Damn it. I need your help, Kru."

"No."

She ground her teeth together, "Again, what makes you think you have a choice?"

Kru laughed, "Go ahead. Kill me. He'll stop you."

Yio struggled to keep eye contact with the thread, "Really? Do you even know who he is, Faeling?"

A fist stopped a moment from striking her head, and Kru shouted, "I am not a Faeling!"

"Then tell me his name." Yio spat, "This mysterious man who meets you at the edge of death and sends you back to the world of the living. Spits you out and tells you that you haven't earned your place in the next world yet."

"I don't know." Kru sighed, "Death, I guess."

"Half right." Yio sneered, "He is the god of death. The new, god of death. I guess the role comes naturally to him, after all, he died too."

She heard Kru's heartrate drop significantly, and Yio smiled, "Yeah. That's the man who doesn't want you dead. Wants you to keep working. So how about you do that? Help me. Maybe he'll even let you die. It is what you want, isn't it?"

"I don't know what I want!" Kru yelled, "Why does everyone keep asking me that? All I want is to be left alone!"

Yio shrugged, "Too bad. You're part of whatever shit this is."

"You don't control me, Fate." Kru spat, and Yio laughed, "But he does. Doesn't he?"

The Fae stood next to her, glaring at her, but unspeaking. Yio didn't say anything. She wasn't sure what it was about Kru that got to her, but she hated the woman down to her core. Everything about her was irritating. Her inability to see the bigger picture. Her selfish anger at herself. Others needed her, and Kru told them she was useless and to find someone else. Neglecting everyone was just as bad as fighting for the enemy.

Maybe Kru would always be a traitor.

"Self-pity is selfish." Yio sneered, "Now help me save this stupid elf so you don't end up infected."

"What do you want me to do?" The Fae asked angrily, standing next to her.

Kru

“I’m containing the curse.” Yio replied, “What you’re going to do is going to look pretty awful to all the bystanders. You’re going to kill Alphege.”

Kru glanced nervously at the queen and her knights and back to the still body, “Say again?”

“Stop her heart. She dies, the curse detaches. I get the fight of my bloody life, and then I can resurrect her, if I survive.” Yio replied, “Look. I’m going to do all the bloody work here, Fae. I just need you to stop her heart, without damaging her, and without getting in the way when the curse freaks out and attacks me.”

Kru sighed heavily. She couldn’t see the curse. None of the others had been able to. The only proof was a single drop of blood fallen to the ground. It really wasn’t a lot to go on. Yet, this was a Fate. They didn’t tend to involve themselves in the affairs of others. Even in the war that got her banished, Yio had only turned up a couple times with warnings. She hadn’t fought in it.

Yet here she was, suggesting she was going to fight.

Claiming the curse was a celestial breaking the rules. If that really was the case, then there was no one better suited to sorting this mess out. Well, if Kao was really around she could probably obliterate the curse instantly, but the price she asked for wouldn’t be payable by anyone. She might leave with half the realm, just for fun. Kao was not a god you went to when you needed help.

Kru walked carefully around the body, and arrived at the other side. This was a simple spell. It only ever worked if the person already believed they would die, but that wasn’t a stretch for someone in this position. This willing to wish their own death.

The Fae raised her hand, a handful of red dust held in it, and she sprinkled it over the face of the still elf. “Ein’drach.”

All chaos let loose.

Kru hit the ground as every window in the building shattered. Every piece of glass on the benches exploded, raining down tiny fragments. She felt her face and arms peppered by shrapnel as she tried to block the worst of it. One by one the pieces of furniture exploded, sending pieces flying in every direction. Through the dull ringing in her ears she could hear the soldiers screaming orders at each other as they tried to defend the queen.

Firm hands gripped her shoulders and she looked up in surprise, seeing him. Seeing his face. A face she had hoped she would never see again.

“Get up, Kru. Yio needs your help.”

She clenched her fists angrily, but he was gone. She punched the ground in frustration, and flipped upright into the air, her wings flaring open with a burst of red and black dust that flew across the room.

She tossed a hand up, easily creating a shield as the shrapnel flying throughout the room seemed to target her, shifting in midair.

She could see them all.

The alchemist cowering behind a cracked pillar.

The medic lying dead on the ground, a pinprick hole through her throat and out the back.

The knights shielding the queen in a hemisphere of armour and steel.

The pink-haired goddess, floating and covered in flames from head to toe, a snake taller than the building standing over her, biting and hissing at her. The flames weren't some strange attempt at power by Yio. They were originating within the snake creature. As it moved she could see it. There were no scales, only dust. The entire creature was made from magical dust.

The magnitude of power to summon such a thing blew her mind. It was beyond insane.

Yet, it had made a mistake, a mistake she understood. So this was why he had made her stand up. She could stop this.

She had to. She couldn't stand by as others fought and died.

The medic had only been here because she was dumb enough to get hurt.

Kru spread her hands, the red and black dust falling from it and swirling in the air. She lashed out.

The magic flowed through her and into the creature. It snapped in confusion at first, before realising the cost of it's choice. The thing was made from black dust. A magic that originated from Luna. A magic that Kru had mastered long ago, when she was a soldier serving under the Guardian of the Shrine, the Crown Princess.

Black dust was difficult to control, it had a will of it's own. A will that sought to destroy and hurt. The only thing that could control it was a rage that was greater than itself.

Kru held up her hand, and slammed it closed.

The creature writhed for a moment, and then the neck was crushed.

There was a brief moment when she could feel the will of the owner pushing back against her, but it was nothing. She pushed it aside nearly on instinct alone, before realising she had basically ignored the will of someone powerful enough to summon the creature in the first place.

Kru floated down onto the ground, walking towards the dying creature.

She touched the tail gently, running her hand over it, dissolving the connections between the particles of dust.

It collapsed, the dust falling to the ground before evaporating.

Elin

The young Entrin looked around the empty campsite, wondering if the others would come back any time soon.

It felt strange, she'd hated the existence of this place so much when there had been people in it, but now that they were gone, she felt desperately alone. She climbed into one of the hammocks, one that looked like it had been set aside for her. The chains that joined onto the ropes were inscribed with vines and creepers. The others also had symbols to them.

One looked like a weaving. Another was a mountain hidden in fog. The last was a boiling ocean.

She didn't know if she could associate all of those with the others, but this one seemed like it was for her. It was comfortable, lying there in the hammock, but she didn't feel safe here. It was too quiet, and not quiet enough.

There was no laughter, or teasing.

Yet she could hear the owls in the trees, and the mice in the grass. She could hear the trees shifting in the winds, and the voices as they spoke to each other in hushed and anxious whispers.

Elin rolled onto her side, clapping her hands over her ears. Had it always been like this in the forest?

She shivered in the cold.

Kao

She stood up quietly, slipping out of the bed onto the floor in silence. She stood up, reassembling her form, and turned with regret to look at the quiet woman shifting in the bed. She wished she could spend all her days with her. Wished she could forget what she knew what was coming, and the pain it would mean for Wintry.

She had duties to attend to. One of them being a very scared and lonely woman in the middle of nowhere, who was feeling incredibly abandoned.

In a way, she was. Kao had let herself to be distracted for too long. The heart may hunger, but the heart could never have what it really desired. The world moves on even if you don't, and if you wait too long you get left behind. Left in the aftermath.

Kao couldn't afford for that to happen, not this time.

She turned sadly, and heard a sleepy voice, "Kao? Where are you going?"

She resisted putting her head in her hands, and spoke quietly, "Go back to sleep, Wintry. I'll be back."

"Where?" The voice asked, the woman obviously fully awake, despite what they'd done to tire each other out.

Kao sighed, looking back at her, "Seriously. I'll be back. But right now, Elin is alone. Yio is still at the palace."

Wintry sat up, grabbing her grey sleeping gown and wrapping it around her, "Okay, let's go."

Kao winced, "That's not a good idea."

"I don't care." Wintry growled, "Not anymore. If you're going somewhere, so am I."

She didn't have the heart to stop her. Truth was, she wanted her with her. Even if it meant that Wintry was going to get hurt even worse. Kao was afraid of what was coming. She wanted to be able to hold her, to hold her hand and feel like everything was okay in the world, even though nothing was. And nothing ever would be again.

Kao held out her hand, and felt the firm grip that took it.

She put up her own and stepped forward, dragging Wintry behind her, the two emerging into the clearing.

Kao winced as she saw the Entrin shivering and holding herself. She stepped onto the tarp quietly, and over to her chest. She opened it up and pulled a soft toy out of the top, turning and walking over to Elin whilst Wintry stared down into the chest in utter bewilderment.

She put the toy in the surprised Entrin's arms quietly, smiling reassuringly at her, before she walked over to the fire pit. She tossed a spark into it, kindling the flames instantly. She heard the forest growing quiet, as the flames licked outwards.

She put her hands up, feeling the reassuring warmth, "Sorry, Elin. I lost track of the time."

Kao felt Wintry wrap her arms around her, and saw the toy being held in front of her, "What's this?"

It was a soft fluff ball, with small furry ears sticking out the top.

Kao smiled, "I made one for each of us. Girl's night out."

Wintry laughed, leaning into her, "You always intended to ask me to join you, didn't you?"

She had. She also hadn't been going to, not after what Yio ran into in the palace. But she didn't say that. She didn't say anything. She couldn't take the happiness away from the woman that she adored. She would stay silent if someone was running her through with a sword if it meant that Wintry didn't get hurt.

Elin huddled by the fire, warming her hands and Kao blinked, "Oh. I didn't say. There's a blanket for you."

Wintry turned, "I'll get it!"

The Entrin looked up gratefully as a blanket embroidered with a map of Eldrasa was draped around her shoulders, hugging it in tight. Wintry leaned against her, wrapped in her own blanket, a map of an unknown world stitched across it. She smiled at Kao, "You really went all out in this, didn't you?"

The goddess smiled, and leaned her own head down, "Yeah. You should get some sleep."

Wintry pulled back, surprised, and looked at her in concern, "Something's happened."

"Yes." Kao swallowed, "But I can't tell you. Because I don't know."

The ears flattened out, and Wintry swallowed, "You certainly know how to reassure a girl."

"You've used that line already." Kao retorted playfully, and sighed as it fell flat. "Yio can take care of herself. Kru's with her."

Wintry pouted for a bit, and then turned and climbed into the hammock above Kao's bucket. She smiled grimly. Even if someone was making their moves against them, already pushing events in a direction she hadn't foreseen, even though she should have been able to, other events were proceeding as expected. Soon all five of them would be here. All five, for a short time.

And then there would be four.

And the four would have to be enough.

Wintry

She was hurt, and scared. If she had still been with her people they'd be sniffing the air, and asking her what was on her mind. Kao could tell, but she had her own worries. In fact Wintry had never seen the goddess this concerned about anything before. She hoped it was just because Kao was obsessive about keeping her away from anything that might hurt her.

The surroundings told her it was a fun camping trip with some girls.

The atmosphere told her that someone was about to die.

It felt like those nights she'd spent, camping on the hills, waiting for dawn, waiting to attack the enemy. The days when she would stand atop a hill and bring a mountain crashing down upon her enemy. The nights when she would prepare herself to wipe out entire nations. When she would fight the gods themselves in a blind and bloody rage, smelling the death of those who died for her.

This felt like the edge of a massacre. The moment before the world ended for so many. The fires burning, warming cold and hungry soldiers, too anxious to sleep. Waiting for the sunrise, to paint the land red.

The gods were dying. New gods would rise. The entire world was changing. The treaties now meant nothing. Everything that her people had died for was no obsolete. Finally, her legacy was gone. Trei had become what she had tried to be. He was the result of her naive childhood. The ultimate fulfilment of a dream that she wished she'd never had. That should never have been allowed to come to fruition.

Kao wasn't telling her everything. There was nothing knew in that. The woman's secrets had secrets. When you are the god of uncertainty, present in all things, in all places, in all times... There's a responsibility. That was something that Wintry could understand. She didn't want to push the issue. She was certain that she wasn't keeping her in the dark without good reason.

Yet, all the same, it worried her.

Kao'el was afraid of something. Something that had just happened, or would happen. She wouldn't say what it was. She said she didn't know, but that sentence could mean much besides a literal knowledge of the event that had occurred. Something had happened that shifted this from a fun camping trip with plenty of excuses to jump on Wintry, to something that meant that Kao'el had reverted to her cold self.

Trying to spare her from the pain to come.

It wasn't fair.

She wanted to know what it was, so she could help. So she could at least be a comfort to her.

Wintry blinked in surprise as she felt the blanket tuck around her, Kao kissed her forehead, smiling down at her, "It'll be okay, Wintry. I'm here."

Then the woman sank under the hammock and into her bucket with a gurgle.

The protoanimarum closed her eyes, trying to will herself to accept the warmth of the blanket, and the cold breeze on her face. Trying to feel the comfort of knowing that Kao'el was close at hand.

Still, her anxious thoughts stumbled over each other, going around and round in circles.

Kyrus

He wiped down the bartop carefully, watching his customers out of the corner of his eye. They rarely made enough trouble for him to have to deal with it, but things had been more tense than usual lately. Not just because the Fae was staying here, or that she was an oathbreaker. The whole of Eldrasa was on edge. It was almost as if a sense of anxiety had sunk into the entire town.

He'd even heard that old frail Farr and tossed a patron out of his shop. The man was rude, but he'd never been capable of physical violence. He was a pathetic weakling, or at least he was to the kind of people who frequented the bar.

Kru was hardly the worst of those who came by. Oathbreakers weren't that unusual, at least the ones that could take care of themselves. The weak ones just turned into a bounty on his floor. When most of society rejects you, there aren't a lot of lines of work available to you. Assassination, theft, and bounty hunting were the main lines of work that the survivors moved into.

And those kinds of people found a place to drink.

Kyrus smiled to himself as he worked, polishing the spit and ale away. He wasn't quite sure why his bar had ended up being the local den of darkness, but it had in the end. It might have been that he only ever stepped in if he had to, or his reluctance to report any crime to the local law enforcement. He'd taught the locals quickly enough what happened if you tried to rip him off. He didn't even have to give out reminders these days, the regulars did it for him.

Things were beginning to change now.

The Fae was an interesting one. She didn't really fit in with the other customers. She was a Fae, so had earned their distrust and anger just by being alive. Usually, all it would be a few asses handed to the wall and she'd become a part of the furniture. She'd done plenty of that, and yet these idiots still tried to pick a fight with her. It was almost as if their caution was being overcome by their racism.

It wasn't something that Kyrus particularly understood. Most of the customers were outcasts, heck he was himself. He wasn't born in Eldrasa, which meant to everyone else he wasn't a local. He would never be a local to them. Too fixed in their own ways. He would always be either a bartender or a crook. He didn't mind that. It meant less people tried to pick a fight with him.

Now and then he had the local law enforcement drop by to try and intimidate him. That had eased off in recent years. Alphege Algar had challenged him to a duel, and he'd survived it. He'd still had his ass kicked six ways to the seventh. Yet, somehow he'd impressed her. She hadn't come by that often, but the elf had been able to drink and gamble as well as the rest of them. She'd been loud and obnoxious, a totally different character to when she was sober.

Things had started picking up again since the new appointment.

He looked up at the current Guardian, who was leaning against the bartop and watching his customers. She hadn't ordered anything, and he doubted she would. She'd just come by to try and intimidate the locals. He wished her the best of luck. They weren't the kind to get intimidated.

A gold coin clattered onto the bartop and he smiled, pouring a pint.

The Guardian sighed, speaking softly, "Do you really think you should be serving a criminal like her, boy?"

Kyrus paused, glancing over at her, "Oh, I really don't think you want to get involved in this one."

The Guardian shrugged, "I'll arrest you."

Kyrus placed the tankard in front of the Fae, who was looking paler than normal. In fact, she looked downright shaken. He wondered just how hard the queen had worked her.

The spear hit the back of his hand with the flat, pinning it to the bartop effortlessly, as the Guardian turned around with exaggerated slowness. She glared at him, "I did give you fair warning, boy."

Kru shook her head, as if trying to focus, and sighed, "Elf, leave him be. I've had a shit day. I am not in the mood for you right now."

"I have a warrant for your arrest, Fae, I'll get to you." The Guardian retorted angrily, and Kru smiled over at her, "Really? Maybe you should show it to my drinking companion, when she gets here."

The Guardian frowned, "Why? So I can arrest the both of you?"

Kru laughed weakly, and flinched, coughing blood into the air. She wiped her chin, "Damn it. Yeah, you know, I'd actually love to know if you even can arrest her. It'd be a hilarious thing to see."

The Guardian raised an eyebrow, and then removed the spear, hanging it on her back again, "I will wait. A short time."

Kru shrugged, and sipped her ale, holding the tankard with two shaking hands. Kyrus sighed and brought the axe that had been above the bar down with a crash, close enough to part the hair of the mercenary who had stepped up behind Kru.

"She looks weak, right?" Kyrus smiled at the surprised man, "That means, I guess, she can't hold back like she used to. And cleaning elfin blood out of the cracks in the ground is a serious pain in the ass. I'd rather you didn't make me."

The elf shrugged, returning to her seat.

Kyrus put the axe back, polishing the blade softly where it had hit the ground, looking for imperfections.

"I didn't know you could still heft a blade, Kyrus of Talanthia."

He bowed as the woman breezed into the room, accompanied by a half dozen soldiers. The Guardian dropped to her knees, "My queen."

She waved the guards off, and they all piled into one of the booths. He was impressed. The queen had actually decided to follow through with Kru's request. A request she'd made without realising any of the implications, he bet. The Elfin Queen wasn't someone who dwelt with her people. Most had never even seen her. She was an idol to so many, a mysterious and regal creature.

The Queen sat on the stool next to Kru, "So what is it that I'll be tasting?"

Kru shrugged, pointing to him, "He knows his shit. Drink whatever he tells you to."

Kyrus swallowed nervously, and swallowed, "I'm afraid I've never served royalty."

"Not as a bartender." The queen smiled at him, "Talanthia. I thought you were familiar, so I looked you up. I remember the Falidrin Front. You were there, and so was that axe. Not so bad. I'm here at the request of the Fae. I'm not her queen, so what would you recommend?"

Kyrus sighed heavily, indicating at the barrels behind him, "She drinks this. It's for heavy drinkers, those who struggle to get a buzz." He frowned and lifted up a jar, "This is spring wine, for the rare more refined guest. The ones who still have taste buds. It isn't the best, but not the worst."

I've also got some foreign drinks. Orkish, trollin, and some more select ones. The rarer, the crapper it is, usually."

The queen smiled slowly, "Oh. Ork, you said? You wouldn't happen to have any orkish blud'raden?"

Kyrus nodded in surprise, "You know what's in it?"

The queen smiled, "I shared a goblet or seven with Drak'tur once."

He shrugged and began pouring a tankard, handing it to the queen whilst feeling self-conscious about the floating grime in the hideous concoction. He only had it on hand for the odd ork who passed through. They drank well, and paid well. However he'd never known anyone willing to touch their food or drink, it was basically pure poison. In fact, blud'raden was cursed. Meant as a test of courage.

The queen raised her glass, and Kru tapped hers against it gently. Something was seriously wrong with the woman. What on earth had the queen done to her? Bled her magic dry? That'd kill her. She was Fae. The Queen wasn't that cruel, was she?

Kru smiled cheekily, speaking tiredly, "So, Guardian, you going to arrest me and my drinking companion, now?"

Kyrus struggled to contain his laughter as the queen turned an icy gaze to her warrior. None of the regulars contained the mirth.

The Guardian rushed out, red-faced, as the laughter and thigh slapping continued.

The queen frowned, "I see. Has she been doing this a lot?"

Kru shrugged, "Queenie, I'm Fae. Your people hate that I exist. You got to give them some leeway. Otherwise your dungeon will be full of the people you need."

The queen looked distressed, and she shook her head, "I'd hoped we were moving passed this."

Kyrus smiled at the two of them, and then put the rag over his shoulder, headed for the kitchen, "What do your boys like, your majesty?"

The queen obviously asked Kru something and replied, "They would not normally partake of anything whilst on duty."

He shrugged from the background, beginning to knead some dough, "I'm feeling sentimental. How about some Talansan bread?"

Alis

She wasn't used to the familiarity that the Fae beside her expressed, but she couldn't hold it against the creature. Not after what she had just done, without a single hesitation.

The Fae had stood up and protected the queen, protected Eldrasa. She'd slain a monster summoned by nothing less than a celestial. Alis had problems conceiving of the amount of willpower that would have taken. This Fae might seem hopeless, and like a lost cause, but she was something else altogether. When the crisis had arisen, she had stepped forth like an avenger.

She savoured the burning fire as it hit her tongue, lighting up her veins with flashes of light as it travelled down her throat slowly. She smiled, "Thankyou for this, Fae."

The woman raised a tired eyebrow at her, "It wasn't exactly meant to be a treat."

Alis smiled at her, "I am aware. It has been many years since I have been able to enter a place like this, however. It was only on the battlefield that people did not treat me as if I were made of glass. Since we made peace with the orks and drove off the goblins... I'm just something delicate to sit on a shelf. To occasionally take down and dust, and put it back."

Kru yawned, "So why not leave?"

"I'm the Queen." Alis sighed, "I have responsibilities. Duties. Never ending duties. The kingdom doesn't run itself, as much as I wish that it would. There is much that still requires my personal attention."

The Fae smiled at her slowly, "You know, you're not half as uptight as you seem."

Alis frowned, "That might be the drink talking."

Kru grinned widely at her, "Nah. That's you. The real you. The one who was so worried about... A friend? That you came to someone you were hoping these bastards had already finished off."

Alis took another sip of the fiery drink, and sighed, "So. You know."

"That you ordered Yggdrasil off limits to me?" Kru grinned, "'Course. I don't blame you any, neither. I'm a traitor. I waged a war against my own queen. What'll I do to a queen I don't care about?"

Alis sighed, "I know it isn't that simple. I know you never knew who Tyr was. And in fact Queen Summer is actually quite angry with me for allowing you to be injured, at the moment."

Kru froze in surprise, "Summer? Since when did she care?"

Alis shrugged, "I received a letter from her before you arrived."

"Oh, from the king."

She shook her head, "No. King Trei and I do not get along. Queen Summer and I have a long correspondence, stretching back many years. I assure you, this was penned by her own hand, with her own words. She warned me about you, and then insisted that I give you all the rights, and none of the responsibilities, as a visiting ambassador."

Kru screwed up her nose, clearly confused, "Summer's the one who nearly left me in the Void for eternity. Why would she care if I live or die?"

Alis shrugged. "I can only tell you what she has written."

The Fae gagged suddenly, coughing blood into her drink. It was a deep and dark colour.

Alis flinched, “Do you need a healer?”

“They can’t help.” Kru growled angrily, suddenly back to the impetuous child.

“If you are certain.” Alis replied sadly, “I wouldn’t wish to lose as valuable an asset as you.”

That was a lie. It felt wrong to lie. She didn’t view her as an asset. An asset was just a tool, something you could use and replace. That would be easy to leave forgotten on the shelf. The moment Kru had stepped up to fight, that category had no longer fit her. She wasn’t a tool. She was an ally. Someone with hopes and motivations. Someone you couldn’t manipulate without risk of losing them forever, a cost that generally wasn’t acceptable.

“Even tipsy, and dying, I can read your thoughts.” Kru laughed softly.

The queen felt her face redden in embarrassment, and she frowned, “Is this common amongst the Fae?”

“Eh.” Kru waved a hand in the air, “Some do, some don’t. Luna taught me. I can grasp impressions mainly.”

Alis considered her again, “Princess Luna. For you to be trained in anything by her, you would have to-”

A hand slammed over her mouth, and she heard swords unsheathing as her knights scrambled to her side. Kru glared at her, brunette eyes staring into hers like death, “You don’t want to finish that sentence.”

Alis nodded slowly, and the Fae released her, sighing, and standing up weakly, “Well, I feel like shit. So I’ll be hitting the hay.”

She wandered passed her, into the hall.

The queen looked after her carefully, wondering. Why was it that Kru didn’t want to talk about her past? There was nothing particularly shameful about the life of a warrior, even in the eyes of the Fae.

The bartender leaned on the bench top, “You need to give her some room on that one, my queen.”

One of her knights went to bark an order, and she held up her hand in irritation, “What do you mean?”

He sighed, “One of the greatest taboos of Faen culture is the killing of another Fae.”

Alis winced.

Kru had killed her own recently, in her rebellion.

“Luna was the warrior sent when it needed doing.” He continued, “So if Kru served under her, then she’s executed her own. That won’t be considered honourable, or even worth remembering. I don’t know if she’s ashamed of it, or even if she still feels shame, to be honest. But you don’t ask the headsman how good with an axe he is. Not in polite conversation.”

Alis smiled nodding, “Yes. That does make sense. Can you let her know I’m sorry?”

“No.” He replied gruffly, “That’d be worse. Just let it go.”

She stood up, downing the rest of her pitcher and stretched, filling the fizz as her veins burned all over. She could see the red glow of the curse burning through her. She looked at him curiously, “One last question, if I may. Why here? Why a bar? You were a mighty warrior.”

“I’m an oathbreaker.” He replied bitterly.

Alis’ eyes widened in surprise, “Oh damn. The Fel.”

He shrugged.

She sighed heavily, “I am sorry. For what it is worth.”

She turned and left before she could embarrass herself any further.

She’d reminded two people of the shameful past they wanted to forget. Stumbling along like a junior politician. She must be drunker than she thought. Or her time in isolation had removed her of all her social graces.

Those were excuses, taking the responsibility of her shoulders.

She was the one who had screwed up.

“We need to talk.”

She looked up at the pink haired woman standing in the middle of the road and frowned, “Will you walk with me?”

Yio

She walked slowly beside the queen, considering what she needed to say, and what she could say. The two weren't similar. Yet, she knew she had to do something. Otherwise she was condemning millions of people to death.

"The treaty ties my hands a bit." Yio began.

The queen sighed, "I was afraid you might say something like that. You cannot tell me who sent the creature."

"Oh, I can." Yio replied, "But it won't actually help you at all. Because you can't stop the person who did. The person who... Let's just say this stuff to do with Alphege is one small piece of a much larger puzzle."

The queen frowned, "Then tell me, who sent that creature?"

"F'rir." Yio replied, almost casually. Her sister's work was unmistakable. Hopefully the queen wasn't stupid enough to believe that F'rir had sent it by herself. That she understood greater powers were at play here.

The queen sighed, "I've been speaking to Queen Summer about events in her realm. She tells me that you never lied, nor told the truth. That you manipulated Janus into sparking a war, in a misguided attempt to spare them from Tyr's wrath."

"If I hadn't, then you'd be talking to Tyr." Yio replied, glaring at her, "Trei survived because of me. Every skill he used to restore the lifestream came because I did something. Without Janus, there would be no magic today. No Evening Realms. No Summer. They'd all be dead, and you would be dying."

The queen shrugged, "I can't confirm that. Because the alternates never played out."

"Do you want to see them?"

The queen's step faltered, and she glanced at Yio. The Fate shrugged, "All the timelines converged. There was only one timeline where Trei succeeded. Every timeline since is spawned from that one. Trei's success is a fixed point. Every other timeline ended in the utter destruction of all realms. I can show you what that looked like. If you want."

"You're a Fate." The queen sighed, "That's... Problematic. You have no reason to tell me the truth. You can misguide me in a thousand different ways, and I have no idea at all what motivates you."

Yio smiled at her, "That's easy. Ask."

The queen blinked in surprise, "What?"

"Ask me what I want." Yio sneered, glaring at her with her black eyes.

The queen paused, staring in terror, "What do you want, Fate?"

"To survive." Yio growled.

She saw a chill run down the spine of the queen, as she began to realise the stakes that Yio was playing for. "How long has this been coming?"

"Since the dawn of creation." Yio replied, "This was always coming. This war, that's sitting your doorstep, that your people will suffer for, this war is what the Fates have been trying to prevent. Trei's birth was inevitability the moment that Wintralassa defied her oaths and stood against the

gods. The moment that Kao was opposed, all of this was set in motion. I have been trying to find a way to survive since this began.”

The queen sighed heavily, “Why did F’rir attack us?”

Yio shrugged, “She’s your goddess. Why don’t you ask her?”

“She’s your sister.” The queen retorted.

Yio smiled, “And? You’re not my sister. Why should I save you?”

The queen looked at her carefully, weighing her, “Why did you come to Eldrasa, Fate?”

“Kao kidnapped me.” Yio replied and shrugged, “You can’t really say no to the most powerful primordial force in existence, can you?”

The queen winced, “Why did Kao kidnap you?”

“Barking up the wrong tree.” Yio yawned, “My soul is tied to Trei’s. I imprinted on him. Kao is trying to separate me from him. So far, hasn’t worked. I still feel like I want to die.”

The queen shook her head slowly, staring at her, “How did a goddess imprint?”

“Trei is a god.” Yio growled angrily, “What he wills will be. His power is beyond my own. He isn’t some king, and he isn’t some mortal. He chooses to just be a king. Just as he chooses to live, no matter what happens. His name is Trei’el. He is the Heir to the Throne of Eternity. Resisting him is about as effective as resisting your own destiny.”

The queen looked at her in surprise, “Does he know he’s a god?”

Yio laughed, “Of course. Doesn’t mean he accepts it.”

The queen sighed heavily spreading her hands, “Is there anything else?”

“Watch your back.” Yio said carefully, “That virus was designed to target not just elfin. It was designed to target high born first.”

Kru

She woke up, her forehead pounding.

She rolled over, retching into the bucket, flinching at the red flow of liquid spilling from her throat.

So it really was that bad then. She wondered briefly if it mattered. She didn't know if she could even die. So far he'd turned up every time. Yet, every time, he'd made her make the decision. It was always her choice to stand up and fight. So far.

Kru leaned on her hands and knees, fighting the nausea, trying not to scorch her throat again. Just the smell of her own breath was burning her nostrils. She didn't want to have to deal with this.

She swallowed, and sat upright slowly. The world didn't spin too much. It didn't stay still either.

Kru flexed her wings, feeling the stiffness in them. She'd kept them rolled up all day, every day, recently. Except for yesterday. She'd flown yesterday. She could feel the tiredness in the weakened muscles. Maybe it was time to stop pretending she wasn't a Fae. Stop hiding. It isn't like it had stopped anyone from stabbing her. It wasn't helping with the guilt of her bloody wreck of a life.

She stumbled through her doorway, unbalanced, and into the bar. The regulars were already beginning to trickle in. The ones who came hunting for jobs and a decent breakfast. They were the veterans, the quiet ones who would glare at her, but never attack.

Kru yanked a newcomer off her stool and sat down easily.

The young elf protested, his ears quivering angrily, but he noticed everyone in the room going quiet and looking away from him. Kru smiled softly, "This is mine. Find another."

He glared at her, "Is your name written on it, Fae? Is your blood spilled for Eldrasa?"

Kru turned around on the chair, her wings unravelling, flexing in the sunlight. She considered him slowly, "You're fresh. Young. You were military, until shortly. I guess that makes you think you know how to fight a Fae. What's your name, boy?"

He put a hand on the pommel of his sword, "Call me boy again, and I'll remove your head. I am called Deslin."

She smiled, "Well, Deslin. I am called Kru. I've fought Alphege Algar. I'm still here. Now, do you believe you're equal to a Guardian? Or are you going to keep picking a fight you can't win?"

Deslin sighed heavily, "Someone want to tell her who I am?"

One of the veterans at the back laughed, "Deslin, the failed Guardian apprentice. Boy, Alphege was better than your master. You're nothing to that Fae."

He drew his sword, slashing towards her face. Kru flexed her wings, watching the blade moving through the air, slowly pushing apart the molecules as it rushed towards her. Her wings flashed with a single beat, and she moved through the air, circling behind him as the blade continued to arc towards where she had been sitting. She'd missed this. Missed the fight.

She considered how she was going to hurt him, waiting behind him, watching his hands. He'd begun to notice that she'd moved. It would be another hundred milliseconds or so before he realised where she had gone and adjusted his tactics to match. She had time to weight the options. She could just flick the back of his skull, and propel him into the bar top. He'd fracture his skull, and get a minor concussion. It would stop him trying to fight her nearly instantly. He might try once or

twice more, but that would be all.

On the other hand, she could humiliate him. That would draw the fight out, and give her a chance to practice.

She waited, as he twisted the sword, plunging it downwards towards her, blind. She stepped aside as the sword moved through the air, and flicked it.

The blade shot from his hand and stabbed solidly into the wall nearby. She smiled as he turned to face her, swinging a face towards the centre of her chest. It was a good punch, and if she let it land it would undoubtedly wind her. He was strong, and he was fast. She'd expect nothing less from an apprentice Guardian, even a failed one.

Kru smiled and leaned forward, biting his ear gently. Her fangs tore the flesh, causing him to bleed. He squealed in pain, reaching up towards his ear, but still tried to hit her, despite being off balance.

Kru stepped aside and kicked the back of his knee.

The Fae fell flat on his back, and she looked down at him, "Not bad, Deslin. Really. But get lost."

She sat on the chair and then frowned as she felt a charged spell rush towards her. She turned, tearing the spell apart with a puff of red dust. The Fae stumbled, groaning as the spell rebounded, freezing and crystallising ice from the tip of his palm up to his elbow, burning him.

Kru sighed heavily, "You're weaker than me. You're slower than me. You're magic, quite frankly, is pathetic. Stop kid, I'm trying real hard not to kill you."

The boy glared at her and it clicked. Kru groaned, "Oh shit. She told you she'd let you back if you killed me, didn't she?"

Deslin blinked in surprise and Kru shook her head, "Fuck it. Come with me."

She stood up, dragging the elf by his elbow, "What are you doing?"

"We're going to go talk to your Guardian about the limits of my patience. And how a fight with a dying woman isn't the same as a fight when I pissed off."

Elin

She smiled as she sat up, hugging the blanket around her.

Kao was already sitting by a fire, cooking away happily. As if she didn't have a care in the world.

The Entrin shuffled in front of her smiling, and sniffed.

The goddess shrugged, "Leftovers. I forgot to grab ingredients yesterday. Hope that's okay."

Elin nodded, and then frowned as Kao held out a small item. The Entrin took it cautiously, unwrapping it. It was a small ball, it was hard, covered in metallic plates decorated with leaves. In the centre of the ball were two yellow eyes, slit vertically like her own.

She grabbed it squeezing it to her chest, feeling the softness with surprise. Beneath the overlapping plates was something softer, making it able to be cuddled easily. She grinned at Kao, shaking her head in amazement.

The goddess shrugged, "Everyone gets one."

There was a thud as Wintry fell from her hammock, face-first into the ground. The woman's ears flattened in embarrassment and she stood upright quickly, and then held out a soft toy with her own ears, "This one's mine!"

Elin smiled at her.

The strange figure grabbed her blanket and wrapped it around her, shuffling over to the fire. She looked in disappointment at what Kao was making. "Eggs?"

The goddess shrugged, "Did I go shopping with you? No? I guess I have to make do."

Wintry pouted playfully, and then smiled up at the ceiling of tree branches, "It is pretty here, isn't it?"

Elin looked over at her, wondering. This was an ancient figure. Wintry had lived here longer than she felt was necessary to admit. Surely she had stayed in the forest at least once? Surely she had seen more beautiful sights than these. Mountains, forests, deserts.

Wintry shrugged, "Everything is beautiful, Elin. The older I get, the more I realise it. Everything is precious. Fragile. Everything fades. Every sunset is different. Every sunrise is a new world."

Kao laughed, "You're showing your age."

Wintry shrugged, holding up a handful of her grey hair, "I earned every one of these. I'm not going to hide it."

They were an odd couple. An ancient spirit that didn't know how to act grown up, and the last of a dead race, who knew more about the subtleties of life than most who had tasted it. Neither was capable of staying serious for long, yet all the same, they scared Elin, as much as they scared the forest. The two of these... If either was to lose the other...

That thought didn't need finishing.

Wintry looked over at her, "Wow. You're a depressing one, E'lani."

The word echoed in the breeze as she repeated it. Kao grinned over at her, "You're starting to get the hang of that. It won't be long."

Wintry frowned, picking at her breakfast, her ears shifting nervously, and then she sighed, "Yio should have come back by now. If she's coming."

“She isn’t.” Kao replied, “She has more important things on her mind.”

Wintry frowned, “Isn’t helping her the most important thing?”

Kao shrugged, serving Elin, “She’s helping herself. Give her time.”

Elin took the bowl gratefully, sipping at the warm liquid. She felt herself come alive as she felt the nutrients breaking down and being absorbed. Kao certainly did have some skill at Entrin cooking. Something she’d never learned, herself. She subsisted on what the forest provided, but never attempted anything more.

She wasn’t entirely certain what the others were discussing about Yio.

She wasn’t sure she needed to be concerned.

A Fate could take care of herself. Even one like her.

Wintry grinned over at her, “Oh, really?”

Elin shot a glare at her, and image of what she would do to her if the woman dared to communicate what she’d been thinking.

Wintry laughed, waving a hand, “It’s fine, E’lani.”

“Bak’toh!” The earth shook as the sound boomed out, and Kao steadied her cooking, “Easy, Elin. Easy.”

She looked down at her bowl, embarrassed and surprised.

Had that really been her, just now?

“That’s the word for... Cease?” Wintry frowned, “Isn’t it?”

“Cease or be destroyed.” Kao replied, “I’d take her seriously, Wintry. It takes pure focus and belief to use a word of power like that.”

Elin looked up at the goddess curiously.

Kao nodded, “Yeah. Every word of Entrin is a word of power. That’s what your people were. You reshaped the world with your presence. You were a powerful and warlike race. You extinguished the dwellers, or tried to, remember? Your people thought of themselves as gods, and so the language that they used was the same.”

Elin shook her head. She wasn’t like that. She didn’t want to be like that.

“It’s who you are. What you are.” Kao replied, “It isn’t something that you can change just because you want it to. Power is in your veins. You’ll realise it one day, or you’ll die. Those are the only options.”

Kao

She wished that Elin would listen to her. That she would understand.

Maybe she was pushing her too hard. She was trying to cram a lifetime of understanding of magic into someone who was still learning what it meant to be an individual and not just a spirit of the forest. It was unfortunate, but she needed Elin to understand. She needed her to know her power, and embrace it.

So far though, it looked as if Elin wanted to reject what she was.

If the tree rejected her power, if she strayed from the path that Kao was setting it out, then everything was going to fail. Was it too much to ask that people actually do what she wanted them to? It wouldn't help to tell Elin why she wanted her to learn. Probably scare the girl so far inside herself she'd never learn to say what she needed to in the first place.

Elin wasn't the only one causing her frustration. The whole group was.

Yio was being her usual self. She knew she couldn't see the timelines anymore, but she was still running around, trying to twist reality in her favour. Interfering in Kao's plans. So far she had screwed up anything beyond repair, but the lack of foresight in the Fate was already beginning to make her look more like an angsty teenager than a celestial who had been guiding the entirety of reality since it was created.

Yet, despite it, some good was coming out of it. Yio had delayed the infection of Kru, even if it meant she was becoming aware of the stakes, and her own role in events. If the Fae had been infected by him, then it would have been all over. Yet, it was still better to let Kru go her own way. She doubted Yio would do that though. She'd pressure the Fae.

The fourth hammock had been set up for the Fae. She was just hoping the Fae didn't understand what was happening. The consequences could be dire.

And finally there was someone that Kao had never been able to control.

Wintry.

She loved her, whole-heartedly, but the woman made some stupid mistakes. Kao couldn't see everything was coming. She didn't know if she'd able to control it, or stop it. But she did know she wouldn't be able to protect Wintry all of the time. She wouldn't be there to save her.

That scared her more than anything.

She didn't know what she would do if Wintry died again. The way things were going, she might not be able to bring her back again. Even the thought of it chilled her to the core and made her feel like she'd stopped functioning.

She felt a peck on her cheek and looked over in surprise, Wintry grinned at her, "The rice has been boiling."

Kao looked down at her burning cooking in surprise. "Oh."

"Got some stuff on your mind?"

Kao shrugged as she tried to save things, "You could say that."

"Willing to share?"

Kao frowned, "So, you expect me to share my body, my soul, and my strangest, darkest thoughts?"

Wintry crossed her arms, “You know, you can just no. I’d understand.”

The goddess smiled at her, kissing her nose, “But I never want to say no to you. Not ever.”

Wintry

She was pouting. She knew it. The whole world knew it from her face. All she could do was sit there and shovel burned rice into her mouth and pretend it was fine. She wanted to reassure Kao'el. She wanted the woman to smile. No one else ever made her smile.

Koa was worried about whatever cataclysmic event was around the corner this time.

Kao was worried about Wintry. That having along for the ride would end up killing her. Which was ridiculous. Wintry had nearly as much power as Kao'el. There were not a lot of people in the world that should be able to worry them, especially not if they were together.

Kao'el needed a distraction. And Elin needed a distraction too. Kao had been pushing the genocidal front a bit much.

"Elin, you've never been to the ruins, have you?"

The woman creaked her neck, and Wintry smiled, "There's some Entrin ruins, deep into Eldrasa. Probably a couple thousand years old. From back when your people conquered Eldrasa."

Elin winced visibly, and Wintry sighed, "No point thinking of your people as evil. Not unless you see how they actually lived."

Kao looked up with cheeks full of rice grains, slowly absorbing, and smiled, "That's not a bad idea. We could use the break. I just wish Yio were here."

Wintry shrugged, "She'll come back when she's ready."

Elin nodded slowly, and Wintry grinned, grabbing her arm and cuddling into her, "Awesome! Girls trip!"

She might be laying it on too much. But she was worried too. So Elin could just deal with over excitement.

Elin slowly put down her plate, and pointed at the sky.

Wintry frowned, "How long it'll take to get there?"

The Entrin nodded and she grinned, "Girl, you're with us. So... Instantly."

Elin stood up, and shrugged.

Kao nodded, "Sure. Now is as good a time as any. Wintry, you've been there more often than me."

She clapped her hands together, briefly, and there was a surge in magic around them. The trees and forests were stripped away, as giant hunks of stone came crashing down from the sky.

Elin fell to the ground, hands above her head, and Wintry blinked in surprise, "Oh. I guess I should have warned you. That's an untraceable teleport. Sort of... Recreates the universe so you are where you want to be, instead of where you were."

Kao glared at her, "It's also a heck of a lot of magic to be broadcasting you have."

Wintry glared back at her, saying nothing.

Elin ignored the two in standoff, staring around in wonder at the ruins. The buildings weren't stone, not exactly. They were made from petrified wood. The buildings were grown, arranging themselves into beautiful shapes adorned with leaves and vines.

Wintry turned away, giving up, "Notice how some of the vines have flowers on them?"

Elin nodded, touching one gently. There was a brief spark of light, and the Entrin jumped backwards. Wintry patted her shoulder, “As I was about to say, they were energy collectors. This whole city was powered by sunlight. Living in harmony with nature. But it didn’t mean they sacrificed their technology.”

The Entrin looked inside one of the ruins curiously, trying to imagine what the furniture might have looked like. What her people had done at home. Recreation, food. Trying to see what she could have been like.

Wintry waved, “Over here. Back of this house, the soil. What do you see?”

Elin just shrugged at first, but Wintry waited. An Entrin had to be able to see it. If they only tried. Beneath the soil were strange hard discs, pellets, filled with seeds. These ones had failed to grow, uncared for by the owner. Maybe just a poor gardener, or maybe a victim of when the elfin took back their home. It wasn’t easy to tell.

“Ga’ai.” The whisper hit the air, and Wintry couldn’t help but grin.

One of the pellets shifted, the seeds inside sprouting, growing rapidly. Tiny questing vines spread through the soil and broke through the surface, rippling as they spread out, growing. Small green cocoons formed before splitting open, revealing the peas.

Elin took a timid step forwards, plucking one of the green balls. She shrugged, and ate it.

Wintry watched as her aura burst into a range of colours. “Looks like your people ate more than just minerals and roots.”

Elin turned to her, “E’lani.”

“Sure. You grew the plants. Take them with us.”

Kao stepped over, whispering her ear, close enough that Wintry felt a soft burn at the teasing of touch, “Not bad.”

Wintry smiled to herself.

“There’s something else to see.” Kao spoke slowly, and Wintry’s ears flattened, “Now?”

Kao nodded, “You need to see this, E’lani.”

The goddess lead the two of them to a large building near the back of the ruins, to a broken mosaic on a wall. Over half the pieces had vanished with time, but enough remained to get the general gist of it.

Wintry had seen it before.

It was a story, of an invasion. The orks came through portals, spilling out into the forests.

Killing everything they found. Trees, elfin, Entrin. Small animals, birds, rats. Everything. Some of it they burned, other things they ate. The vast majority was discarded. The death was the goal. It wasn’t a hunt. It was a massacre.

The central image of the mosaic was missing. All you could see where a few hints of a sun or bright light. Probably meant to be around a hero of some sort, because on the other side of that missing image, the world had return to normal.

Elin looked back at them, her brows furrowed.

Kao’el nodded, “A prophecy. Of destruction. It hasn’t happened yet, at least not to my knowledge. Your people foresaw a cataclysm. I don’t know if this is just an artist’s rendition, or the

prophecy itself. It shows Entrin. You are the last. So maybe it's from a time when your people are restored. Or maybe you are a part of the prophecy. Or maybe the artist never thought your people would be wiped out before it would happen. But one day, these monsters will burn your home."

Wintry smiled tightly, "That's why Kao'el is pushing you. She's rude, and cruel, but she means well. She wants you to be prepared, to be able to defend yourself, if we aren't around."

Elin nodded, the thoughts still spinning around inside the young Entrin. She was right. That was a lot of responsibility. More than Kao should be pushing on her. Not so soon after awakening. Kao had to know something more. Something she wasn't saying.

Kyrus

He looked up as a group of shining knights walked into the bar, sprawling out over the tables.

The tension in the room shot up.

His ears leaned back softly, and he walked over to the first table. One of the knights smiled up at him, “Got any of that bread from yesterday?”

Kyrus smiled, “Sorry, no. That was a one time thing. I’ve got some pastries, or some tohvah.”
“Nothing better?”

He turned, looking at the Guardian. The infuriating woman who liked being a pain in his side. Waking him up at random hours, threatening his customers. She walked around as if she owned the world, and if things kept up, he’d be losing his livelihood. His customers weren’t going to be turning up if they thought that the palace guards and the Guardian might be there.

He’d get no cut of bounties. Even Kru might not come back.

He shrugged, “This is a bar. Not a tavern.”

The Guardian smiled at him, “Where’s the Fae?”

“I thought she’d gone to speak to you.” He shrugged, “Something to do with telling an apprentice he could make it if he killed her.”

Alfiti laughed, grinning at him, “Well now. Deslin had courage. Now how about you have courage and make something decent?”

Kyrus sighed heavily, considering his options. “Yeah. Get out.”

There was a small creak of metal as the conversation in the bar vanished, and the palace guards prepared to grab their weapons. The Guardian stood up and walked over to the bar top, “You know what... How about a bet?”

Kyrus glared at her, and she placed her elbow delicately on the bar top, “Best of three. If I win, you feed us. If you win, we leave.”

He walked behind the bar. He probably couldn’t just throw her out.

He didn’t want to arm wrestle with a woman who had very few weaknesses and incredible strength that bypassed what was normal for an elf. She shared her existence with Yggdrasil itself. She wasn’t just Guardian because she was the best trained. She was soulbound to the lifeforce that allowed each elf to live at all.

She flexed her hand, and Kyrus held up a hand, “Just a moment, Guardian. Boys, all the bets down?”

There was a murmur from the regulars, and a look of surprise from the palace guards. Kyrus smiled, “What are my odds?”

“Ten to one.” One of the veterans replied.

Kyrus nodded slowly, “Wow. Love the faith, boys.”

He put his elbow down gently, and Alfiti grabbed his hand in an incredible grip. It felt like he was holding an ork.

She smiled and pushed.

Kyrus grinned back at her, feeling his arm flexing. He heard coins exchange hands. He hadn't gone down immediately. Nice to know he could still surprise some people.

Alfiti glared at him, pushing hard. It was all he could do to keep them at a deadlock. He couldn't push back against her, but he could still hold his own. Her ears flattened against her head, going red, and she hissed.

Kyrus smiled back at her, feeling a trickle of sweat beginning to run down the back of his neck.

She let out a soft growl, and he felt his arm beginning to shake as she pushed him to his limits. She was astonishingly strong. Her muscles may as well have been made from diamonds. He had a feel she was playing with him. That she was trying to see how little strength she could expend and still beat him.

He winced as he felt his wrist crack. Alfiti smiled at him, feeling the fracture. He tried to see what strength he had left. Tightening and pushing, ignoring the pain.

She frowned, looking at him in surprise, and he suddenly felt her arm go limp. He let go before he could slam it home.

The crowd of regulars started yelling angrily, and Kyrus stood up, rubbing his wrist. He nodded towards the doorway, leaving the customers to sort each other out. They would. It'd be messy, but less so than getting involved.

He leaned against the wall outside the building, "That was surprising."

"Shut up." Alfiti replied, not looking directly at him, "You're an odd one. Kyrus of Talanthia. You have a sense of honour. A willingness to fight. You don't allow anyone to mistreat you, and you care about those who no one does. Yet, you live in this crap hole. Serving traitors and bandits. What the hell?"

Kyrus shook his head, "I thought the answer to that would be obvious. I am Kyrus of Talanthia. You know what I've done."

The Guardian spun, her spear landing point-first against his throat, "Nothing can forgive what you've done."

"Exactly." Kyrus replied, "I'm not fit to live amongst other elfin. No one in Eldrasa has a need to accept me. Why should they? So I make my living in one of the very few options that are available to me. I'd rather not spend eternity starving."

She glared at him, "I had family who died at Talanthia. How... How can you be... Just? Righteous? After what you did."

"It's easier to hate a monster that doesn't have a face." He replied carefully, and the Guardian withdrew the spear hesitantly, "You wouldn't blame me if I killed you, would you?"

"No."

She shook her head, turning away from him, "Perhaps it would be best if I never returned here."

Kyrus considered her. It'd certainly make his life easier. And she could continue to pretend he was a monster, letting her hate burn coldly, but she'd be able to move on all the same.

"I don't think that would help you, in the end."

The Guardian laughed, "El'drak'en. You can't even let me go my own way, can you? You have to still say what is the right thing to do."

“Saying is easy.” Kyrus replied, turning to head back inside the bar, “Actions are what matter.”

A strong hand grabbed his shoulder, nearly lifting him off his feet, “Is that why you blame yourself? Despite the pardon?”

“Words don’t matter.” Kyrus sighed, “There is no action I can take that can bring back those that died by my hand.”

He was turned around, looking into those brilliant blue eyes. Eyes that reminded him of her mother, now more than ever. Alphege had always fought. Been willing to do whatever it took. She would pay whatever price was necessary. One look was all it took to know it.

Now, Alfiti was looking at him the same way.

“Why did you kill them?”

Kyrus winced, “I would have to break an oath to the queen herself to tell you.”

Alfiti’s hand on his shoulder tightened, lacing pain throughout his body from the pressure point, as she stood there glaring at him. He doubted the pain was intentional. She was arguing with herself. She wanted to make him tell her. But she wasn’t about to force him to commit another crime.

The Guardian released him, “Then tell me. How do I make the queen reveal it?”

“You don’t.” Kyrus replied, “The only one who would be willing to tell you, is your mother. She’s the only one not bound by the oath we all took. The only who one refused.”

Alfiti sighed heavily, shaking her head, “Mother is dying, Kyrus. That’s what the stupid Fae is supposed to be helping with. Yio is helping now. Or trying. No one seems to be having much success.”

Understanding dawned on him.

Kyrus ran into the bar, grabbing the axe from above the bar, “Get out people, we’re closed.”

He walked out, and Alfiti stared at him, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Saving Alphege. Repaying a debt.” Kyrus growled and began moving towards the palace, “I’ll need your help, Guardian of the Shrine.”

The elf caught up to him, hands tightening, “What is it, little elf? What do you think is happening here?”

“Your mother is connected to someone, somehow. Right? Her soul is connected.”

Alfiti shook her head, “She imprinted on King Trei, when she fought with him. How did you know that?”

“I didn’t.” Kyrus tightened his jaw, “But it’s how he works. How he kickstarts his invasions. They corrupt the heart and through it the land. The corruption spreads, becomes the plague. The plague changes the magic, and it becomes the Fel. When the Fel grows, a rupture will form, binding the two realms together. They invade, and kill everyone. The dead are revived, as ghouls and liches. The two realms eventually become one, because of the corruption of the Fel.”

Kyrus hefted the axe in his hand. It still felt familiar, even if he hadn’t used it in a long time. Almost too long.

Alfiti whispered, almost reverently, “Drak’tur.”

Alis

The queen sipped at the wine, feeling it course through her, lighting up her veins with fire. It had been so long since she'd had any, she couldn't help herself. She'd ordered a couple cases be brought to her after she'd shared her drink with the traitorous Fae.

Now though, she had another traitor to deal with.

One who had more power and influence than she would ever have. Ever could have. It was practically a definition.

The queen served the goddess.

"F'rir."

The pink-haired woman looked at her tiredly, "I'm a bit busy, so spit it out, Queen."

"Why could Yio see what you did not?" Alis replied, "Alphege. She's infected."

F'rir hissed angrily, and began pacing, "That stupid sister of mine. As long as you didn't know about the infection, you were safe from it. That's the damned point! Alphege tried to kill herself, to keep you safe from the infection. To lock it away. Your awareness of it, gives it the power it needed to take physical form. To disperse into the air."

Alis frowned, "Who is attacking us, Fate?"

F'rir laughed, "Really? I have to tell you? Look at your hand, queen!"

Alis looked down, at the wine, and then back up at the Fate, "I don't... Understand."

"You hated bluud'raden. Drinking with Drak'tur was one of the worst parts of negotiating the treaty. Having to pretend to get along with a butcher. A man who tortured and murdered thousands of elfin!" F'rir glared at her, "What made you ask for bluud'raden, in the bar? It wasn't the Fae's suggestion. The bartender barely mentioned he had orkish drinks, and the thought sprang up. Like a craving."

Alis dropped the goblet, staring at the Fate as she heard it bouncing on the wooden floor with a dull thump. The Fate glared at her, "He's coming back. And he already has hooks in your soul. How are you supposed to resist his mind, if you are open to it? You couldn't know. I protected you as long as I could."

The queen felt something settling on her. Like she was being strangled.

She reached up desperately for her throat, or tried to.

But she couldn't move.

Yio

She swung her head as the doors slammed open, two elfin walking in, calm and strong, but with a determination she knew only came from one place. A conviction, an unshakeable belief about something that must be done.

She pushed off the table where the alchemist was working away and walked over, “Guardian... And... Bartender?”

“I am Kyrus of Talanthia.” He replied, glaring at her, “Oathbreaker, and Slayer of the Ninth Legion. Butcher of Talanthia. Childkiller. I was once a vessel of Drak’tur. He has returned, and I will put him down.”

Yio glanced back at Alphege, “Huh. So it’s him, then. That explains why I can’t expel the bastard. How were you going to?”

The axe hefted in the man’s hands, “The haft was given by Yggdrasil, the blade was forged in the heart of a dying star. The runes that protect it were carved by F’rir herself.”

Yio took it from his hands effortlessly, balancing it on a finger, “Nicely weighted for a battle axe. I guess it might work as an executioner’s weapon, but I get the feeling this would work best in the hands of a paladin, not a childkiller.”

Kyrus snatched it back, striding passed her, “I won’t be executing anyone. He’ll recognise me. He’ll come. I need you, Yio. And you, Alfiti. This is not going to be a fight. We will be on the defensive.”

She flicked her pink hair, glaring at his back.

He was right.

It just irritated her that he somehow worked this out without ever coming and seeing Alphege. It was obvious, in hindsight. She’d been so focused on which celestial might be acting out, which god might be trying to seize power, that she forgot that even the gods feared some creatures. Vastras had terrified Yio. A human mage that managed to destroy the lifestream, who had the power to make her terrifying dreams a reality.

Drak’tur was on another level. He was once a protoanimarum. He became something else. He created the orkish race, himself. He forged a disease of magic that created a new realm. He wasn’t just a mage. His power reached the heights of gods, but without the insight. No careful planning, no considered action. Just a blind rage, and an obsession with corrupting everything.

Kyrus was right.

If he picked a fight with Drak’tur, here and now, they would lose.

Yio sighed, plucking a strand of her hair, she twisted it between her fingers for a moment, and then threw it.

The bartender went down instantly.

Yio felt the spear of the Guardian materialise against her throat, “He’s right. But this is not the way to do it, elf. You can’t fight him by charging headfirst into battle. You need to prepare. You need gather... Oh, void.”

The Guardian glared at her, “What?”

“Kao.” Yio growled, “She’s been preparing for this. Exactly this. Wintry to match Drak’tur. Elin to prepare the battlefield. Me to prepare your soldiers. Seal this room, Guardian, with all the

magic you have at your disposal. Don't let anyone in."

She turned and the Guardian frowned, "Where are you going, Lady Yio?"

"To get you the army."

Kru

She couldn't open her eyes, that just about been smashed in. She could barely feel her wings, the chains binding them were tight enough they'd nearly cut them off. She was lying on her side, hands and ankles bound, with a short chain joining them together as well. Her lip was split and burning, and her chest felt as if something had stomped on it. Something probably had.

"Awake, at last." A voice like gravel being crushed spoke.

She sat upright slowly, gasping at the pain shooting through her as she did. There was no use pretending, or trying to hide. Not against this man.

This monster.

"I'm going to ask you one last time, Fae, and you'll answer. Or you'll have bored me." The voice grated, "How did you detect my presence in Eldrasa?"

She spat blood on the ground.

She'd rather die. Give the others the time they needed to put two and two together. It hadn't even been her realisation. It was Dreslin's. They'd missed the Guardian, but Dreslin saw the alchemist working on Alphege. He spoke allowed, reasoning about the chemicals being created and applied.

It was an offhand observation that had sent her world to a new void of pain and damnation.

"The purification process, that's almost like the Fel."

Except it wasn't. It was Fel. The taint of the orkish warlock, Drak'tur.

The alchemist wasn't an elf. He was an orkish shaman. He'd banished them both, delivering them directly into the hands of the most brutal people to have ever walked the realms. Directly into the hands of Drak'tur himself.

"I am bored." The warlock replied, standing. She felt the surge of Fel. It was akin to magical dust, but it wasn't dust. It was a corruption of it, as if dust had come alive and infected, driving into the heart of the soul and twisting it. Once infected you only desired to spread the infection. It overpowered your senses, turning anger and hatred into the only things you were capable of feeling.

Kru grabbed a hold of the spell, struggling as she felt the Fel swarm over her. Trying to drown her. Kill her. She was plunged into icy depths and propelled from fiery volcanoes as the Fel crashed around her. She dug in, not seeking peace, like with magic. She embraced the chaos. It was a reflection of her anger, of her hate. It would follow her command.

She stood up shakily, glaring as the swelling in her face receded.

Slowly, she saw the man watching her. He was tall, even for an ork, towering head and shoulders above creatures that stood twice as tall as most men. His shoulders were as broad as a horse was long. The tusks that emerged from his mouth reached halfway up his skull, and were sharpened to a fine point. His eyes blazed like blue fire, a sign of the undead. Except he had never died. He simply embraced the magic that was capable of resurrection.

The ork glared down at her, as she struggled to contain his spell of death, to seize the power behind it. He smiled slowly and began to laugh, "A Fae. A Fae who can wield the Fel. Now isn't this... Exciting."

A hand like a tree slapped into her face, knocking her to the ground.

Kru lost her grip on the Fel, and the torrent poured down over her.

She screamed.

Elin

“Prepare for battle!”

Elin spun around on her seat, looking as Yio marched into the small campsite, and she cocked her head.

“Drak’tur is invading. Now.” Yio growled, looking at them all, “One day, Kao, you and I are going to have a talk about honesty. For now, we need to prepare. This world will fall without our help.”

“We are gods.” Kao replied angrily, “We can’t intervene, Yio. The treaty.”

The pink-haired woman stared at the translucent one in astonishment, “You have got to be kidding me.”

“The others will hold us to the accords.” Kao replied, “Now, more than ever. They’re all desperate. They’re losing their power, Yio. We can’t afford to upset that balance. Yes, this world might be lost. But it doesn’t mean we can do anything about it!”

Wintry yawned, standing up, “Huh. So I guess that’s where Kru, Elin and I come in, right?”

Kao shrugged, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I can’t control anybody.”

Elin stood up, flexing her hands.

So this is why the goddess was pushing her so hard to remember the violence of her people. For a false hope. Even Elin knew the name. The warlock of the orkish people. An unstoppable monster of darkness and corruption.

He burned the forests to fuel his armies.

“War.” The word of power whispered into the air, and the others looked at her in surprise, she glared at them, and then gestured.

Wintry nodded grimly, “Then you have the forest, E’lani. We will do what we can.”

E’lani smiled at her. She was a friend. A life worth protecting. That was one small thing she was certain of. She did not trust the goddess, either of them. She did not believe the dwellers had any right to wander about her forest.

None of that had really changed.

But now she knew she could defend her world. And that she must.

Kao

Kao hugged Yio's shoulder as the two watched from the Void.

She wanted to explain to Yio why she couldn't intervene, at least not yet. But they weren't the only ones capable of peeking in at the other worlds. She could feel the others. The celestials. Gathering their strength and preparing for their own petty wars. This could not be allowed to be the powder keg that ignited the battlefields. The worlds could not be allowed to fall like that.

Yio sat down slowly, crossing her legs, watching. She wasn't pouting. All she had was a grim air to her. An acceptance of the horrors about to pour forth.

Kao sighed, dropping into a formless blob, "Drak'tur was never the most predictable."

"You spent ten thousand years preparing for this." Yio growled back at her, "You used me and Elin. You used Wintry. Don't you feel any guilt at all about using the woman who actually loves you? The one who cares about you?"

Kao didn't respond straight away.

It hurt.

It was truthful, but it hurt. She deserved to hear it, and far more besides. Things that she'd done that Yio had no idea about - not yet. They were crimes against everyone and everything that were unthinkable. Yet she had thought them. She had imagined them, and then turned that imagination into reality.

"I have done everything I can to make sure Wintry survives." Kao said slowly, her voice like steel, "That is the only outcome of this that I am remotely interested in."

Yio blew her hair in frustration, "So. This attack won't stop at Eldrasa. Unless Drak'tur is stopped here, and now."

"The Fel." Kao shivered, wobbling, "That is what this comes down to."

Yio shook her head, "I don't like this."

"You don't have to." Kao replied, "You made him move early. I don't know how this ends."

Yio frowned slowly, "Wait. My connection to Trei. That blinded you to events?"

"Yes." Kao replied, "I couldn't even see Tyr because of Trei's freaking light of self determination. He causes more chaos than I ever could."

The pink-haired Fate leaned back on her hands, "Well. I guess we're all fucked."

Wintry

She dashed into the capital, moving faster than the elfin around her could follow. Her feet barely touching the ground as she was carried on the winds themselves.

She skidded to a stop, watching the soldiers marching out from the palace and into the streets. They moved in uniformed procession, in light gleaming armour. She shook her head. They were toy soldiers. Not men and women who had fought against the horrors of the orks.

Where were the veterans?

She leaped over the endless movement of soldiers, landing inside the palace grounds, and followed the flow of magic. She paused as she saw an elf on her knees, a spear in her hand, held upright. A sealing spell emanated from it, surrounding a building.

Wintry could already see the cracks in it.

She walked over, tossing up a sealing spell of her own, knocking aside the elf's. The woman collapsed, breathing hard, "Are... Are you the... Army... Yio... Promised?"

"Not quite." Wintry replied, her ears flattening as she felt the force slam against her spell and nearly shattering it in a single blow. "The celestials are insisting Yio not be involved."

The elf looked at her in horror, "We can't hold this, not our own. Not against him. It took F'rir to stop him last time!"

She shrugged, pushing back against the force inside the building, tracing the familiar paths in the angry magic hurled against her, weakening the spell before it could hit her defences. "You'll just have to make do with me, and Elin."

The elf pushed herself upright, holding her spear at the ready, "And who are you?"

"I am Wintralassa." She replied grimly, "Guardian of the Shrine, Alfiti."

The elf looked at her in surprise, "I know the name. But not from where."

"I am the one who stole magic from the gods." Wintry replied, flinching as the spell almost broke, "And this man, well... It looks like he recognised me. Crap."

The sealing spell exploded, tossing them backwards. Wintry just skidded on her feet whilst the elf was nearly blown away altogether, only saved by the spear stabbing into the ground.

The building collapsed, turning to black dust that floated hesitantly in the air.

A massive creature, skin just as black as the dust strode through it, glaring with those angry balls of flame. He saw her, and stared.

She smiled grimly, "Aran."

"That is no longer a name." The ork replied, "No creature may bear that title. It died with me. When you stood against me. Weren't you executed for your crimes? Are the gods so concerned that they raised the first sinner?"

Wintry swallowed nervously, "Sorry, Aran. My girlfriend did that."

He smiled, and laughed loudly, a sound that seemed to make her every instinct scream it was time to run.

She agreed.

She tossed a few hundred spells in his direction and grabbed the elf.



Kyrus

“Steady.” Kyrus ordered, his eyes on the edge of the forest.

The elfin at his sides had their shields at the ready, braced as one, staring at the depths of the forest. They could already see the corruption coming. Trees withering in the distance. The ground cracking and drying. The shadows were becoming darker, impenetrable even to elfin eyes.

He fought to keep himself in the moment. This felt like that time so long ago.

When the plague had taken his own mind.

He squeezed the axe in his hands. It was his protection. So long as he held this weapon, the Fel couldn’t reach him. He couldn’t say the same for the soldiers, but there were priestess’ scattered amongst the ranks. He just had to hope they had enough of them to hold back the tide.

Strange growls and screams began to come from the forest in front of them.

Ghouls.

Mortal creatures, stuffed with a soul. Any soul. Full of anger and hatred, whipped on by the desires of the one who resurrected them. Blue dots started to become visible. The burning flames that were the eyes of the necromantic creation.

“Steady!” Kyrus yelled loudly. He couldn’t afford to have anyone break ranks. If anyone ran, it would all be over. The panic would engulf the unit, and then so would the monsters they were about to fight.

“Brace!” He ordered, ducking down behind a shield as the first wave of creatures burst out of the forest. The shields crashed in a violent cacophony. Kyrus stood, swinging the holy axe through the air, separating tendon and flesh from something that looked like it had just crawled out of the grave. The blue eyes went silent.

Kyrus turned, blocking and striking again as the claws of another went for him.

“Loose!” He shouted as he wrestled a ghoul onto it’s back, slamming the axe down through the skull with sickening crash. Burning arrows launched over head, striking the ranks and swarms of the enemy.

It wasn’t enough.

The shield wall gave way.

He found himself on his back, desperately holding up the axe haft as a feral creature gnawed at it, trying to bite through it and into him. His knee slammed upwards into the creature’s gut, unbalancing it long enough for him to roll sideways and swing the axe with full force.

The creature danced out of the way, in time for an elfin blade to emerge through the skull.

He didn’t have time to thank the soldier, moving to his feet as a ghoul came screaming in over head, on fire and attacking madly.

Alis

She wasn't.

Not anymore.

Something else was.

Something else had taken control.

F'rir was on her knees, bound to the ground by a spell that Alis couldn't believe was actually possible. The power behind it exceeded everything she'd ever felt, and it was somehow being channelled through her own body, without killing her.

Whatever was taking her for a ride, using her body as easily as she wore clothes, tapped her fingers on the edge of the throne, as if thinking. She couldn't feel the thoughts. She couldn't see an aura. She didn't even know if whatever was controlling her was even alive.

"You know, F'rir, it has been a while since someone so spectacularly failed to live up to my expectations." She heard herself say. The cadence and pattern of the voice was her own. There was no indication that something else was in control.

Alis wanted to cry and scream and rant. But she couldn't. Because wasn't in control any more. This wasn't her body any more. She was nothing. Nothing more than a memory, a dream of the past. She was bearing witness, but she couldn't intervene. Couldn't control anything.

The Fate struggled against the spell holding her in place, breathing raggedly, "Good... To hear you... Drak'tur."

Alis felt herself laugh, "The Dark Lord? No. He wouldn't waste his time with you. My name is Yurika. I'm one of his wives."

The queen remembered Yurika. She remembered meeting her, all those years ago. She wasn't kidding when she said one of his wives. Drak'tur had hundreds of them, and even more concubines. She hadn't remembered the exact reasons for it, but most of it had to do with either magic or politics. The man cared for no one. No except himself. He wasn't just the face of the race, he was the race. Every other ork was lesser than him, and anything that wasn't an ork was worth even less than that.

Yurika had been quiet, but Alis had felt her strength and her threat throughout the meetings. She was a warrior mage. A master of Fel magic. She had acted as Drak'tur's bodyguard at the time, not officially, but still clearly.

So that was who had seized control of her. At least F'rir could tell she wasn't in control. But that wouldn't help if Yurika turned around and recalled her forces. If she ordered the execution of anyone who was helping. If she surrendered to Drak'tur.

They could hear the fighting from hear. Swords and arrows. Flames and howls and screams and death.

War had come to Eldrasa.

F'rir smiled tightly, "Oh... Really? He... Has... More... Pressing... Concerns?"

"Shut up." Alis replied without mirth, standing up slowly, "You are not supposed to interfere here, Fate. You could breach your precious treaties again, like you did last time, but I would not recommend it. I don't think the other celestials will agree to allow you to. So... What shall we do with you? We can't attack you. We're just trying to keep you out of the way."

F'rir sneered, "You're not going to kill my people."

"They're already dying, and joining our ranks." Alis replied off-hand, "Ah. How about I hand you to a celestial. One who doesn't like you. One who can keep you out of our way. Does that sound like a peaceful way of ending this dispute?"

The pink-haired woman shook, her strength clearly almost gone. Struggling to stay even barely upright under the weight of the unrelenting spell.

The queen began sketching symbols around the wooden floor, surrounding the Fate in a circle of some kind. Alis didn't recognise even one of the symbols. It wasn't orkish, nor Fae or elf. The design didn't seem to reflect anything she knew or understood. Wasn't goblin, or even Entrin. Yet despite all that, the symbols were familiar. They must be beyond old for her not to recognise them. Or something very new.

F'rir smiled slowly, "Wrodin. You're going to... Send me... To the god... Of war..."

Alis nodded, smiling at her, "I'm sure he'll be happy to accept this offering, from a loyal servant who worships him and his acts."

Yio

She paced her bedroom. She'd left Kao to watch in the Void. She didn't want to. Didn't want to watch people die whilst she sat back and did nothing. Forbidden to interfere, in events that must not come to pass. Every timeline converged at this moment. There weren't that many that survived long after. Fewer were the gods survived at all. Sarin walked in slowly, "Yio."

She glared at her older sister, "I don't want to hear it. People are dying. People that shouldn't die. We're losing the ones who warp history. We're losing Alphege, and if she dies, so does Trei. So does Summer. If Alfiti dies then so does Eldrasa. If we lose the elfin people... This will take more effort to repair than the last time the gods went and ripped up the fabric of reality in a tug of war."

Sarin sighed, sitting down, "I know. I do know, Yio. I know it can't happen."

Yio paused, looking over at her, "Do you have an answer?"

"Maybe." Sarin said with difficulty, "I don't know if it'll work. Just a chance."

Yio smiled slowly, "Like saving Trei."

"Yeah." Sarin said sarcastically, "And look how that turned out. The aftermath isn't over yet. Drak'tur has the power of a god. He's using Alphege's connection to Trei to fuel the Fel. There's nothing the orks can't do. They're only fighting the elfin because they enjoy the war. They can't actually lose, not if they gave it their all."

Yio flopped backwards onto her bed, her soft toy appearing in her arms, "This sucks. We're all going to die."

"Maybe." Sarin replied uncertainly, "We have a few things up our sleeve. Firstly, Wintry."

Yio smiled stiffly, "She was Drak'tur's equal in life. But now he has Trei."

"That's not what I meant." Sarin smiled, "Whilst Wintry is around, none of the gods will want to be looking too closer at events. Not when they've allowed her to continue to live. We all know everyone knows, but none of us want to admit it. Admit that we allowed a traitor to live. That gives us some leeway."

Yio shrugged, "Not enough. Not to fight a god on divine terms. Overpowering that orkish bastard is going to shine out like a brilliant light. It's going to take so much power and effort it might just rip reality to shreds again."

"So we need to make him weaker."

Yio pushed up on her elbows, "Wait. That's possible? How? I couldn't break my thread to Trei. I doubt Alphege can in her coma. Breaking Drak'tur's connection to her is impossible."

Sarin nodded, "True enough. But I actually put someone in play already. Someone who knows the Fel. Knows how to use it. He isn't strong enough to control it and wrest it from Drak'tur. But there is someone who is."

Yio shrugged, "Kru. She has no idea what she is. No idea what she's becoming. So who are you sending to teach her?"

Sarin winced, "Yeah. It might not turn out that well, but it was the only card I could see to play."

Yio groaned, "Oh voiden. Tyr? She hates him. Hates everything about him. All her self-hatred is going to turn against him the moment he turns up."

The older sister nodded, biting her lip, “I know. Which is why there’s another card I have to play. It might well be my last.”

Yio felt a small chill run down her spine.

Sarin nodded slowly, “You’re still tied to Trei. Still part of events. Which means you could be allowed to intervene... If you... Gave up being a celestial.”

The Fate dropped back onto the bed, her thoughts spinning around and around. It was a good plan, assuming she survived it. It put them on equal footing with Drak’tur. It didn’t stop him, or beat him. It wasn’t a super weapon that would decimate the enemy or drive them away. It was a compromise. A chance.

She’d have to give up everything she ever had.

Everything that made her who she was.

She’d be confined to a single form, a single timeline. She’d lose her ability to directly influence the future, and to notice when the gods were manipulating her. She’d never again be able to shift the balance of the ’verse. There was no way that Sarin would suggest this lightly. If Yio left, then there would only be two Fates left. They’d be out of balance, and weak. It would become easy to kill them both off, before one could resurrect the other.

Yio didn’t know what to do.

She wanted to become mortal, so that Trei could finally see her for who she was. Bonus if she ended up saving his life in the process. He’d have to acknowledge her, and that made her feel a rush. The thought of another kiss, even though she knew it would never happen. Yet still, her heart hoped.

She could picture herself in a small cottage, in the mountains, listening to the stream and to Trei playing with their child.

Yio brushed a tear off her cheek angrily.

It couldn’t happen. Not ever.

He didn’t love her.

He never had.

She was alone. As alone as she’d always been. Being a Fate or not wouldn’t change that.

All becoming mortal would do is make her a target. She might be able to talk Kru out of killing Tyr, but surviving in a war was unlikely. It didn’t matter how strong you were, or how skilled. Anyone had a chance to die in battle. Blind luck determined if you would survive or not every bit as much as your own abilities. A stray arrow. A mistimed strike by an ally, and you could be dead.

No second chances.

Violent death is permanent. It breaks the cycle of reincarnation for the Fae. It destroys the soul of the elfin. There was only one single race for whom violent death did not spell utter disaster. Mankind. The humans. Their soul alone could remain uncorrupted, because they lived violently. Their hearts were already filled with violence and hatred and rage. Every man, woman and child was just a single push away from becoming the monsters they fear in the night.

Yio didn’t know what she was. If she gave up being a Fate. Was her heart violent? Could she even fight without access to her abilities? She hadn’t touched lesser magic in so long she wasn’t even sure if she would become a magic user at all. Her entire existence would be frustration. Unable to see

the future or the past clearly. Unable to perceive the nonlinear flow of the timestreams intertwining around her.

Unable to see the moments that must be. The facts of reality.

She'd be unable to make any decision, despite knowing inaction and action result in consequences alike.

She would be nothing but a shadow of herself. Who was she without knowledge, strength and the wisdom to use them?

She wouldn't be able to tell Kru why not to murder Tyr instantly. She wouldn't be able to see the outcomes as she spoke. She wouldn't be able to see what Kru had to do. What she must do if they were to succeed.

Yet there was something Yio could already see, and it scared her.

The timelines were about to converge, a moment in history that is fixed. And in that moment, so many things happen.

And one of those events, was her own rebirth.

She would become mortal.

Kru

She woke up painfully. Her head throbbed, her heart ached. Her chest felt like it had been kicked in by a horse.

Kru rolled her head, feeling stickiness where she had been drooling. She wiped it habitually, and paused as she saw her hand. She hadn't been drooling. She moved her swollen tongue slowly, tasting copper. She coughed violently, her hold body shaking, her wings flaring with each hack.

Something nearby grunted, and she glared up weakly.

The figure wasn't completely visible, hidden in the dark of whatever hellhole she'd found herself in. The ground was coated with straw, clearly intended not for comfort, but for ease of cleaning. For mopping up the blood of the victims put inside this small room. It was circular, the ground was stone. She couldn't tell what the walls were made of, she couldn't see them. In fact the only light seemed to be emanating from the ground itself. A dull blue-ish hue.

The figure spoke slowly, quietly, a guttural and head-splitting sound all the same. "Ko'rah to'rah fos'ner rak'tor'an do fo'sa."

Kru smiled weakly, "I have no idea what you're saying. Only orkish I know are cursewords."

"Com'mon da." The ork growled back. They were clearly restraining themselves for her benefit, but she wasn't sure why. She was a prisoner. She didn't want to be here, and she'd gladly take a fall and die if it meant freedom.

She shifted softly, the chains around her ankles and wrists rattling loudly, "Yeah. I speak the common tongue. I am now. So what?"

The ork moved uncomfortably, "Dis et... Ston?"

Kru scratched her head, "No. I didn't get that."

"Dal ston." The ork said, stomping a foot.

"Hard?" Kru questioned, "Common tongue is hard for you?"

"Da."

She rubbed her head, "Whatever. Doesn't matter to me."

The figure let out a long snort, an irritated sound, and then the ork crouched in front of her, revealing black braided hair, and red eyes. The tusks were short, barely visible along their mouth at all. The skin was etched with hundreds of symbols, not with ink or stone, but with scars. Kru recognised some of them, a bare handful.

She frowned, "You're a shaman."

"Et... Girl?" The ork replied, leaning back, "Vitch."

Kru laughed, "Okay. If you want to call yourself a witch, go ahead."

"Et tu."

Kru glared, "I am Fae. I am not a witch. I am born of magic, and I will return to magic when I die."

The ork scratched a symbol on the stone, tapping it, "Fel."

Kru shivered as she started to understand. "The Fel isn't magic. It's a storm. A corruption. It burns and fights. That isn't magic."

The ork laughed, “Fel, she angry. Always angry.”

The Fae glared at her captor, “Oh please. I don’t want to learn to use the Fel. I only did what I had to do, to survive.”

The creature nodded, “Fel. Always.”

Kru scratched her head, “Nope.”

“Fel. To survive.” The ork said with irritation, “Fel is fight. Fel is war. Fel is life.”

It wasn’t just the name for their corrupted magic, then. The Fel was their philosophy, their religion. It was what told them how to think, how to live. Told them what was in the hearts and minds. The Fel was the true spirit of the ork.

It explained a lot.

The urgent will to survive, when you fall dying. That was what was needed to control the Fel. If that was right, if she wasn’t just guessing but actually understood, then it explained why the Fel was so much more powerful than most magic. It was desperation.

She’d seen the aftermath of a forbidden spell, in Summer’s Garden. Summoned by Luna. A spell so corrupt, but so desperate, it tore men and women apart. Tore their souls out and used them as fuel to eliminate everything she designated as an enemy.

The Fel, and that spell, were fuelled by the same corruption.

Desperate times caused men and women to reach out desperately. It made you make stupid mistakes. Like justifying the use of something so evil. She’d seen enough evil in her life. Enough evil clothed as a friend.

Ashwen had them all laying down their lives proudly, for a lie that was never true.

Playing into the hands of Tyr, the undead Fae. The legend, and the horror.

She wouldn’t be that tool again. Never again.

Kru could feel her magic, and her dust. It was depleted, but it wasn’t gone. There was enough for this. This one thing that might save her from becoming the thing that she hated.

The spell took form before the ork in her cell could react. Kru smiled bloodily as her throat was slit. She tumbled backwards, falling into darkness as the ork howled angrily, a rough hand gripping her throat as guttural calls went out.

She smiled, drowning.

Warm hands caught her as she fell. Kru looked up in surprise at the shadow holding her. The man who wasn’t quite there.

“I’m ready.”

The man sighed, his head turning towards hers, “It could be. It just could be. But if you die, Kru, so does everyone else.”

She glared at him, “I don’t want any part in this war.”

“That’s your decision.” He replied, “I won’t make it for you. I’m just here to give you perspective. The perspective nobody can have in life. To see where your journey has led you, and where it leads for those you leave behind.”

Kru blinked in surprise, finding herself standing in her home.

She walked to the window, placing a hand against it, staring out at burning fields as snow fell from the sky. She stared as she saw her people. Friends and family she had known for generations. They were running. Behind them, black creatures moved like brutal truths in the orange light.

She watched as her people died.

Cut down instantly by blade and by fire.

Kru winced, her fist hitting the frame of the house, "What is the point of showing me this? I can't change it!"

"That's the point, Kru." The man replied, "You can. If you don't die, here and now, then this doesn't happen. That one choice changes this future, forever."

She turned to him, glaring, "And the other times? Did the future look like this? I won't be used, not again."

"The other times were worse." He whispered slowly, "Because you lived, you inspired Kyrus to fight."

The Fae nearly fell as the landscape around them changed again. They were by the edge of Eldrasa. She saw ork and elfin warrior, fighting and dying as the sky rained blood. The mud beneath their feet had turned to a swamp. In the middle of it all, she saw the bartender.

His elfin ears were pulled back, as he roared a challenge, fighting an ork.

Neither were armed. Both were desperate.

Kru choked at the sight. This wasn't right. The man had stood up and fought, because of her? Then he would die because of her.

"Keep watching."

She clenched her fists, wanting to scream and threaten and hurt the figure. But she watched. She forced herself to watch as a man who she wasn't worthy to call a friend was beaten into the ground by the ork. As punch after punch crashed down into his face.

She fell to her knees, "What are you showing me?"

"What is happening." He replied, "What is happening, right now. What you can change, if you stand up."

Kru looked at him with tears in her eyes, "How can I change this? All of Eldrasa is fighting! A few hundred elfin cannot fight ten thousand orks!"

He pointed, and Kru growled as she turned her gaze and then stared in surprise.

Orks were disappearing. Just strange strangled growls as they seemed to be ceased by the air and dragged into the forest. The roots of the trees were moving. The trees were moving. They awake.

Wooden hands grabbed an ork suddenly, and Kru felt her heart skip a beat as she saw the neck snap. A yellow-eyed creature stepped out from the forest, and she sang. The ground exploded as if it had come alive. Swallowing the orks and spraying rubble and armour into the sky. The air slammed into her like a solid force, pinning her face to the ground as it rocked. Flames spewed into the howling winds.

A strong hand gripped Kru, lifting her upright. "Whilst you live, there is hope. But you are not alone. You were brought to Eldrasa, Kru. You were supposed to be one of four. Four people to change the timelines, to change destiny. To stop the armies of the ork, right here."

She glared at him, "What four?"

"E'lani of the Entrins." He gestured to the figure destroying the attack against the elfin. Even in it's utter devastation Kru could already see it wasn't enough. She could see that this was just one battle raging around the city. The orks were breaking through the ranks. The city was going to fall.

She held up hands in surprise as a burst of light lit up the world like a new dawn. She blinked furiously, trying to see as she saw a grey-haired woman appear from the source of the light, hundreds of spells flying out from her, tearing down orks, piece by piece. She'd never seen magic used like this. Nobody could be capable of that many differing spells, not controlling all of them. The dedication it would take to do a tenth of what this woman was doing whilst under fire didn't make sense. It wasn't possible.

"Wintralassa of the First People." The man smiled grimly.

Kru stared, unable to believe it. There shouldn't be any survivors of the first race. Yet if this was one, she could see why the gods had feared them. Why the theft of magic instilled such a terror that it had created a war that had very nearly destroyed reality altogether.

Pink hair trailed in the air next to her, and Kru turned in surprise, watching as Yio walked calmly onto the battlefield. The goddess sighed heavily, and whispered, "I know you're watching, Kru. We need you. We need you to turn the tide."

Then the woman tossed up her hands and a wall of flame spread, flying over and around the elfin and char-grilling the orks where they stood.

"Yio."

She turned slowly to the man, shaking her head, "I can't help. I'm just Fae. I'm nothing compared to these three."

"The last is Kru, of the Kruei." He replied, stepping towards her and holding her hand gently, "Master of the Fel."

She felt fear trickle down her spin, and he smiled at her, "The only advantage the orks have is the Fel, Kru. I only ask this of you - take it from them."

Kru clenched her hands.

She didn't know what to do. She was terrified by what she could see. She didn't want the orks to succeed. To burn their way all the way to her home. But she was just a warrior. She wasn't as strong or as powerful as any of these. All of their races were mythical. Two of them were the last of their kind.

"You are the first, of yours." He spoke gently, and Kru glared over at him, "What does that mean?"

He shrugged, "You've touched the Fel. It touched you back. You're not just a Fae anymore."

She growled angrily, shaking. She could feel it, though. She wasn't just angry, not anymore. A part of her was something more than wrath, more than hatred. It was alive, and it hungered to shatter bones and rip flesh. It screamed at her to embrace her ancestry, and to destroy the orks where they stood. All of them.

She could do it. She could see how to do it.

"The choice is your Kru. But if you are to change the day, you have to live."

E'lani

Her hand punched through the twisted steel, and through the rock-hard skin, grabbing the innards of the ork's throat. She tore it back, turning as a tree struck the dying ork into the ground, crushing it into the muddy soil.

Jagged steel blades struck against her, as her roots blocked the majority of the blow. She grabbed the head of the ork and slammed her own into it, crushing the skull of the creature. She let it fall as the light began to fade from its eyes.

She sang a song. She didn't know where it came from, or what the words meant. She just knew the song. It poured through her, waking up the world. Waking up the whole of Eldrasa. Waking it up to fight.

She could feel the taint corrupting the ground. The hatred burning through the ground, killing everything that resisted it. Seeds choked and died. Flowers twisted and turned to poison in the air. Trees fell.

E'lani couldn't tolerate it anymore. She would not allow dwellers, any dweller, to take her world.

She would take theirs, first.

Roots and vines sprang up through the ground, wrapping around pitch black skin, tearing it open. Breaking bones and revealing them to the world. Muscles and sinews snapped. Torn flesh fell to the ground, replaced by roaring anger.

The blood spilled across the land.

E'lani groaned, holding her head.

The blood. It infected the land. The stink of putrid death and corruption filled the air. Filled the soil.

She choked, falling to her knees, coughing black sludge.

The infection was spreading. The more she touched the magic of the land, the more it infected her.

Kyrus

He leaned against a building, coughing.

His ribs were cracked, one of his lungs were punctured. His cheek had been torn open, and the number of cuts covering him were not worth counting. They weren't shallow, either. He had minutes of consciousness left. Minutes before he became another casualty of this first attack.

That's all this was. Just a scouting party.

Wars weren't won in a single moment. Battles scarred history. Thousands of them, stealing lives and dreams and hopes. Wars tore apart reality, piece by piece, until the will of one side was defeated.

He had to do it.

He grabbed a nearby soldier, coughing, "Retreat."

The man nodded and turned, yelling, "Fall back!"

He didn't move, as the soldiers fell back to the next position. He picked up a fallen sword slowly, staggering as he moved towards the orks, charging head first. Someone had to make sure someone survived long enough to retreat.

The ork in front of him froze, struggling for a moment before it slid to the ground in two pieces. The spear sticking out of the soil floated up into the air gently as an elf landed gracefully beside it, she took hold of the spear, and then she danced.

Kyrus stood in shock, watching at the brutal wave of anger crashing down against the creature. She was untouchable. Yet, she was still overwhelmed.

The orks ran passed her, and Kyrus spat angrily, and then jumped into the fray. His sword pierced flesh, breaking in the tusks of the second ork. He grabbed the tusk, using it to plant his knee into its skull.

It wasn't enough. The third sent him flying into a wall, shattering it and what felt like his spine.

He couldn't move. Every time he tried lighting flared throughout him, and the pain threatened to knock him out.

An ork stood over him, glaring at him with those red eyes.

A warhammer swung downwards.

"You are totally useless, aren't you?" A strained voice spoke, and Kyrus looked in surprise at the woman holding back the warhammer, wincing with the effort. The ork gasped as a spear emerged from its back. She sighed and took up the spear, glaring at the oncoming hoard, "Can you move at all?"

"Leave." He growled, "I'm dead anyway."

"Screw that." Another voice spoke, as a pink-haired woman stepped into view, "You're coming with us, Kyrus. You can live with that."

Soft feet touched the ground to his other side, "Yio, I've got this. You're still... Dealing."

"I'd rather kill them myself." The Fate retorted as black flames began to surround her, "You two, retreat. The palace is the best bet. Seal everyone inside the grounds. We'll deal with Alis later."

Alfiti spun, picking him up and throwing his broken body over her shoulder.
The pain crashed and blackness closed in.

Alis

She stood over the Fae, looking down at her. She could feel the disappointed frown on her face, as she reached out and took a hold of the silky pink hair, tipping back the head of her goddess slowly.

“You know, F’rir. I thought your people would be harder to fight. That you would be tougher than this. I’m... So disappointed. You are all so boring. Like rats running before the hounds. In a single day, I will conquer your world. I will defeat your people. This is not war, this is sport.” Alis sighed heavily.

She wanted to scream, to run, to beg forgiveness.

But she couldn’t.

F’rir smiled up at her, an angry glint in her eyes, “I’m disappointed in you, Drak’tur. Do you really think my realm, one where I actually live, is so easily taken?”

Alis glared at her, “What have you got up your sleeves? You’re about to die.”

“Anyone come back from Yggdrasil yet?” F’rir grinned at her, and Alis felt herself shake with anger. She dropped the Fate, her fist suddenly crashing down and knocking the Fate sideways into the ground, shattering the floor beneath her head.

She felt herself lift up her hand and the spell was quickly formed. Impossibly quickly. The air tore open in front of her, and she felt herself wear a look of confusion. Through the portal was nothing but darkness. A black void.

She turned and glared at her fallen goddess, “You’ve cut the shrine off. Is it even connected to the realms anymore? That is a temporary measure. Summer tried that. Janus still found a way into her precious garden. Do you think I am less than the Faen Arbiter? He was nothing. An idiot.”

F’rir groaned, sitting up slowly, blood running down the side of her face, and she smiled weakly, “I don’t know. See... I didn’t actually have anything to do with it, Drak’tur. My sister did.”

Alis placed a hand on her hip, “Which sister?”

“Sarin.” F’rir said rolling her jaw and delicately feeling where she’d been punched, “Though, knowing her, she didn’t have any direct involvement at all. She won’t break the treaties.”

Alis nodded slowly, “An emissary, then. I sent ten shamen to secure Yggdrasil. What would be capable of defeating them? Of separating a part of a realm from the rest? This is not inconsiderable magic. It doesn’t just take power, it takes significant skill. Who would you send, F’rir?”

The Fate shrugged, “If I had a choice? Summer. She’s the only one who has done it successfully, that I know of. She came back, dying, but with more skill than I’ve witnessed before or since.”

Alis made a sound of vexation, and dismissed the portal to nowhere. She sat on her throne, clenching and unclenching her fists.

“Well, I guess I just need to draw out this emissary then. A few more deaths should do it. Some brutality. Broadcast to anyone who is attempting to watch on.” She felt herself cast a spell, linking her to so many other minds.

She felt like she was being swallowed into the ravenous screaming multitude. She was being buried by their thoughts, their angry flashes of violence and magic. She could hear them fighting, tearing, killing.

“Bring me the Guardian.” Alis stated flatly.

Yio

She spun her hands, raising the barrier again as orkish magic slammed into it. Weakening it, sickening it. The magic began to fight her, to have another will. The Fel spread through it, turning the dust to something else. Something made of anger and hatred.

She clenched her hands together, pushing her will against it.

She was Yio, there was no one as strong as her. No one who could call themselves her superior. Her will was unbreakable. It wasn't just strong, it was indomitable. She had never been defeated. Not in any timeline, from the beginning to the end of the 'verse. In the whole of reality, beyond the abstraction of time, she was who she was. No one had ever forced her to give up. To make herself theirs.

And no one ever would.

Wintry placed an exhausted hand on her shoulder, "We're nearly ready, Yio."

She nodded, biting her lip nervously.

Whilst she wouldn't allow the Fel to overpower her own magic, someone else's was another thing entirely.

Behind her she could hear Wintry and the Guardian arguing about the construction of various symbols, the angles and the placements as they made the magical circle. It had been a very long time since Yio had seen anyone actually make a circle. They were powerful and ancient artefacts, but mostly redundant in a world where people could use magic without incanting at all.

There were benefits to the magic Wintry was dredging up. There was no dust involved. The magic was older, more ancient. It didn't rely on the generosity of the Fae and Sumner's legacy. Which meant the orks had nothing to corrupt. The spells took longer, and were harder to cast, but they were damn near unstoppable.

Wintry growled an order, "Now, E'lani!"

The Entrin shouted something and Yio dropped to the ground, grabbing her bleeding ears.

The barrier in front of her vanished, but the orks didn't leap through it. They couldn't. Where there had been an opening into a courtyard, now there was nothing. An opening into nothing, extending forever.

Yio looked away from it painfully. She couldn't remember the Void being so enticing before. Calling to her. Strange what being able to die did to a person.

She tapped her ear gently, hearing everything like it was underwater.

She saw the Guardian flopping backwards onto the ground, exhausted. Wintry was standing over the fallen soldier they'd rescued, her ears flattened in concern. E'lani was on her hands and knees, gasping as black bile poured out of her mouth.

They weren't an army or a hope.

All of them was riding the ragged edge, between life and death. Yio smiled, that's what it meant to be able to determine your own history. It was in moments like these that Fates and gods became powerless, when men and women could seize control of the entire course of history - and change it.

Wintry turned to her, saying something.

Yio shrugged, and tapped her ears. Ordinarily she would have just healed herself, or prevented the damage in the first place, but she couldn't do that now. It would defeat the point of what they were trying to do.

Wintry sighed and gestured to the fallen soldier.

Yio crouched over him, checking his pulse, his eyes, and listened to his breathing. She nodded slowly, "He's a dead man. Three of his six lungs are punctured and filled with fluid. His heart is struggling to keep up. Probably internal bleeding. He'll be dead within the hour."

The Guardian shot to her feet angrily, and Yio looked at the blonde in surprise.

The woman walked over, her ears pulling back as she crouched next to him. She touched his face delicately, and Yio sighed heavily. She knew that look. Knew it too well. The look of someone who wants something they can't have. The look she had every time she thought about Trei. A look of hurt, and betrayal, but love all the same. The look of someone who is lost, and knows they are.

Yio sighed, "From the shores, hidden by ancient mists."

The Guardian turned to her, eyes wide in terror, and Yio shrugged, "I'd hurry up if I were you. I don't know how much longer F'rir will live. She won't be able to grant every request."

Alfiti winced, clenching her hands, her words spilling through the fog as Yio struggled to listen, "I only get one. We only get one. I don't know if it is him. If it isn't then..."

Yio sighed and put a hand on her shoulder, "Your mother gave hers to Trei. Then she had to leave him. It hurts. But it doesn't mean an end to you. Right now, all that matters is how much you want him to survive this. We can't use magic, not right now. If you have other suggestions..."

Alfiti stomped her foot angrily, and then turned, falling next to the soldier and holding his hand tightly, she closed her eyes and whispered. Yio couldn't hear her, but she knew the words. She knew them well.

It was a promise that F'rir granted to every elf.

"From the shores, hidden by ancient mists."

A promise given to every elf who lived in the elfin realms, the worlds hidden away from the others by time and magic. Worlds shrouded in mist.

"Born aloft by an Elfin kiss."

A kiss sealed the promise, enforced the pact. It was a kiss like few others. It tied two souls together. It was a promise to the gods, that these two souls were two halves of the same coin. That though death separated them, they belonged together.

"Clear the way, and lead you home, to eternal bliss."

That the only road to happiness, was the resurrection.

Alfiti leaned up, and kissed him softly, hesitantly, tears running down her cheeks.

She might not be able to see it, but Yio could. She could see the auras of the two. The rapidly fluctuating hate and adoration that the Guardian had for this soldier. It was a classic story. He annoyed her so much because her heart was already so close to his. He made her feel things she didn't want to. She would insult him, and whatever he said in return would simultaneously devastate and enrapture her.

Yio might not be able to see the strands of fate anymore, but she could see the fate of these two.

The Guardian clenched her fists, crying silently.

Nothing was happening.

Maybe they really were too late, maybe F'rir was dead and buried. Or worse. Drak'tur had already managed to siphon magic off from one god, another wouldn't be too much of a stretch.

Yio made a face of disgust as she felt something wet and slimy hit her shoulder with a thud, and Kao grinned at her, kissing her on both ears, healing her. "Hey, Yio."

She glared at her, "Kao."

The Guardian looked up in surprise, her pain masking instantly as she stood, drawing her spear.

The goddess waved a hand, "Sorry, F'rir is busy. Something to do with Drak'tur attempting to strip out her soul or something. So she asked me for a favour. My name is Kao'el, and I am the goddess of chaos."

The Guardian didn't waver, but Yio could see the terror in her aura.

She couldn't blame her.

Kao still scared her, despite what she'd done for them. Maybe even because of it. She wouldn't have taken the leap of faith, and become mortal, if it wasn't for Kao convincing her that she might one day find more to life than Trei. And she had a sneaking suspicion that had been the point all along. To give her a taste of the freedom that came with mortality, the freedom to make your own choices.

Kao tapped her chin, "Yeah, you're going to have to lose the anger. I'm supposed to check if you actually love the guy. How much you do. Whether it really matches true love or whatever elfin call it."

Alfiti lowered her spear slowly, "Yio?"

She shrugged, "Trust her? Nah. Never. But, you can't fight her. Can't argue. She's the goddess of chaos, Guardian. The most powerful of the old gods."

Kao turned, looking back at her, "Old gods and new. I like that. It makes sense."

Alfiti looked down at the fallen soldier, falling next to him, "I don't know. That's my answer, goddess."

The liquid woman put a hand on her hip, looking at the two of them carefully, "When did you realise you liked him at all?"

"When I saved his life." The Guardian replied, "I let us lose the front to protect him. I... Don't know why."

Kao shook her head, "Sure you do. All you have to do is admit it, elf. He pissed you off. All the time. You always looked forward to those fights. The flash of anger. Feeling your heart race as yours ears burned. There's no one who can get under your skin like a hottie."

The Guardian looked up at the goddess in more than slight confusion.

The goddess sighed, and then gestured towards E'lani, "Yio, you might want to look into that. It doesn't seem great. Wintry... Can I have a minute?"

The Guardian put both hands on his bleeding chest, looking into the eyes of the soldier.

Yio knew that uncertainty.

She touched Alfiti's shoulder gently as she walked passed, crouching next to the Entrin. She knew what Kao was pointing out. She didn't really need to look, but it was always best to do what Kao wanted. Even if determining what the woman wanted was often an utterly impossible task.

E'lani was puking up Fel.

She was infected, and where she was vomiting was also becoming infected. This little haven they'd made for themselves wouldn't last long. The Fel would reveal it to the orks, and they'd be dragged back to reality, surrounded and fighting again. This was nothing but a temporary reprieve.

Yio, lifted the Entrin's chin, looking at her eyes. She grimaced as she saw the flecks of red in those yellow eyes. She was infected. She'd be dragged into the corruption, linked to every ork. It wouldn't be long. She'd turn against them.

"E'lani." The breeze whispered as those yellow eyes glared into hers.

Yio smiled, "I know you're fighting. We all do the best we can. I'm not angry. I'm not disappointed. I'm worried about you. Worried you'll lose yourself again. I don't want that to happen. Once was punishment enough for all the crimes of your people. It certainly wasn't fair to thrust it on a child."

The Entrin relaxed, and wrapped her arms around Yio, pulling her into a hug. She sat next to the woman, one arm around her, instinctively stroking her moss-like hair as she looked at the worried elf, and the dying one.

"Who was he?"

Alfiti looked up in surprise, "You don't know him, Fate?"

Yio shrugged, "I didn't really do much with elfin. F'rir was in charge of your lot."

"His name is Kyrus." She said softly, looking back at him with worry, "He was possessed by Drak'tur, in our last war. He killed so many people. His entire city. He murdered his family, and friends. He killed their children, sacrificing them to bring the ork more power. That was his crime. He was an oathbreaker, even if he couldn't control it. It made him an outsider. Made him hated."

Yio winced.

It explained a lot of the conflict the Guardian was feeling. How could she love a man that represented everything that elfin reviled? How could she care for someone who would never forgive themselves for what they had done?

"What matters, Guardian, is if you can forgive him."

Alfiti looked at her in surprise, and Yio shrugged, "I love Trei. An undead man who wasn't supposed to survive. A man who lead to the deaths of all the gods. A man who created this war, by becoming something that Drak'tur could exploit. I hate what he's done. I hate that he hasn't even realised it and tried to help. I hate that he rejected me, as if I never meant anything at all. I hate that I feel everything for him, and he feels nothing at all for me. But I still love him. I wish I didn't, but I do."

The Guardian sighed, looking down, "I was supposed to execute him today. I received the order from the queen at first light. Kyrus apparently fell through the cracks. He was supposed to pay for his crimes long ago. Things were... Chaotic after the war. It is hard to administrate the people when less than half are still alive."

Yio's eyes widened, "That doesn't make sense. That's not right."

The Guardian frowned, "What?"

"Alis is possessed by Drak'tur!" Yio growled, "He felt threatened by Kyrus. Why? Why would a stupid retired elf threaten a man with the powers of a god? A man powerful enough to bind my sister?"

E'lani raised her head, and Yio glanced down at her. The Entrin grabbed Yio's wrist and tapped it softly.

She couldn't feel it there anymore, but she knew what it meant. The red thread that bound her to Trei.

Yio smiled slowly, "Kyrus was once possessed by Drak'tur, you said. Did you mean Drak'tur himself, or an orkish shaman?"

Alfiti shrugged, "Is there a difference?"

"Yes!" Yio exploded, "Because once you connect to another soul that way, you leave a trace."

The Guardian winced, "So he's tainted then."

"No, you idiot." Yio said, standing up and disappointing E'lani as she stepped over to examine the soldier, "It means that Kyrus can be a vessel to connect to Drak'tur in the same way he's using Alphege to connect to Trei. It's an opportunity, a weapon."

Alfiti put a hand on Yio's shoulder, pulling her away from the man slowly, "You're not using him like that."

Yio glared at her, "He doesn't have long, we need this. To fight this war."

"You're not using him!" Alfiti yelled, her ears twitching angrily.

Kao reappeared behind the woman, clapping her hands, "Well done. Wish granted."

Then the goddess was gone.

Kru

She sat up, coughing in the cell.

The ork nearby didn't get a chance to speak. Kru slammed her shoulder into their gut, winding them and breaking her shoulder, before she spun behind them, using the chain joining her hands to her feet to wrap around their neck.

She didn't try and choke the ork, instead she pulled it tight fast and violently and flew upwards as fast as she could. There was a sickening crack as the neck snapped.

She dropped to the ground, falling onto her hands and knees, breathing heavily.

Kru reached out, seizing onto her hatred. The hatred that flowed in the world. She felt the crashing mountains of anger, and she brought them to bear. She filled herself, feeling her shoulder repair itself. She stood upright slowly, and spread her hands, the chains burning and sizzling as they melted and fell off her. She barely felt the pain where it scorched her. Not just because the Fel repaired the damage, but because the pain simply didn't matter.

She punched through the door to her cell, and stepped out into the midday light.

An ork standing beside the hut slammed an axe down towards her. Kru glared, freezing the weapon in its place and looked up at the ork, her brown eyes glaring into his red eyes, into the Fel inside. She opened the window to his soul, crawling inside his skull. She tore him out of the network, ripping him from the minds of his family, his comfort. In that loneliness she forced on him, she became the only voice he could hear.

Kru turned and nodded, looking at the rest of the encampment.

The alarms went out as the ork began to attack those that had been his friends. Kru walked forward into the chaos, seizing the orks. Feeling the cracks in their minds and personalities. She understood them, each and every one of them. Weak wills, weaker minds. Tortured creatures raised to live and serve the strongest will without question. Now a new will surfed the Fel.

She paused, looking sideways through the dimensions at the thing examining her, "Go back to Sarin. I don't you. I don't like you. I'd rather kill you, Tyr."

The black-eyed Fae nodded slowly from where he was hiding, not quite inside reality, "I wish I could die, Fae. I wish Sarin had let me. I wish it was over."

Then he was gone.

So she'd guessed right then.

The only Fate arrogant enough to bring back a man who'd very nearly destroyed the 'verse was Sarin. The only celestial stupid enough to think they could control a power like his. A determination and will that had manipulated history over eons too long to know or understand. That wasn't the kind of person who could be beaten, could be imprisoned or contained. That was the kind of creature you had to kill, whether you wanted to or not.

Kru turned back her attention to the battlefield, or what was left of it.

She looked at the half dozen orks bowing in front of her, the remnants of their family still hanging from their mouths.

The man had called her something new. Something that wasn't quite Fae anymore.

He was right.

She didn't feel horror or shame at the violence. She felt pride and joy. She felt excitement as she realised that Drak'tur would have felt what she had done. She couldn't contain how happy it made her to think that he might try and fight her. Might try and bring war against her.

She could force his hand though.

Kru turned, opening a portal in the air to Eldrasa.

Kyrus

He opened his eyes tiredly, looking at the black sky overhead.

It took him a moment to piece things together.

He didn't know where he was. The sky had no stars. It felt strange. Yet, comforting.

His memories were a confused jumble. Flashes. Memories of pain, struggling to breathe. Of the Guardian standing over him. Her touching his face gently, whispering something. Nothing more. He wasn't sure what it was. He'd certainly never seen the Guardian look so kind before in his life. Maybe it was a dream or hallucination. That would fit with the whole feeling like he was dying thing.

He pushed himself up on his elbows, feeling exhausted, but uninjured.

Had he been healed at Yggdrasil?

This was a courtyard of the palace. He recognised it, even if he'd never walked inside it. Yet, something was off. He couldn't see out the entry to the courtyard. Near him was a fire, and three sleeping figures.

One was covered in a bed of black moss, and seemed to be both a woman and a tree. He'd never seen anything like her before. She seemed to ignite a fear deep inside him. As if it were an instinct.

Another had pink hair, and ribbed ears. She seemed to remind him of a Fate, but she didn't feel that way. The aura of a Fate was blindingly bright, blocking out almost everything around them. It wasn't that way with this woman. She seemed small. As if she were no more powerful than any of the others. In fact, she seemed weaker. Her hands were clenched and she was sweating, moving fitfully in her sleep. A nightmare. He couldn't imagine a Fate experiencing a nightmare.

The third was another creature again. He didn't recognise her species. She had grey furred ears poking up through her hair, which seemed to twitch as she slept. She was wrapped in a warm black woollen blanket, the smell of which he didn't recognise either. It wasn't the hide of any creature that lived in Eldrasa.

He wondered how he got here. Four people, none who shared the same species. It seemed so unlikely, so strange.

"Kyrus."

He turned his head, blinking as he realised he wasn't lying alone. Curled up next to him was an elf. Her hair was golden, and her sleepy eyes shone like brilliant blue gemstones in the relative darkness. She was holding the blanket up gently, a blanket he had clearly been under until somewhat recently. She was offering it to him.

"Guardian?"

The elf blinked furiously, trying to wake up. She stretched out, grabbing one of his hands, trying to pull him closer.

He didn't move.

Her ears turned pink and she glared, "That wasn't a request, idiot."

Kyrus stared, "What?"

"Under blanket. I'm cold." The Guardian snapped, and Kyrus slid slightly closer and she

tossed the blanket over him, placing a hand in the centre of his chest, and resting her head on his shoulder. She seemed to almost instantly go back to sleep, but he wasn't comfortable. He didn't understand it.

"Idiot." She muttered under her breath, and he sighed, "What the hell is happening, Guardian?"

"Alfiti." She mumbled, a leg suddenly wrapping around his waist, "And you're mine, Kyrus."

He turned his head, "Say what?"

"You were... Dying." She yawned, "So I kissed you."

His heartrate sprang through the roof. He looked up at the starless sky overhead and tried to control his breathing. If she had, she had every right to claim him. Yet, he didn't understand it. Didn't the woman hate him? Had she just saved him because she needed an extra pair of hands? Was their situation so desperate that she'd given up that promise for someone she didn't actually care about?

He felt her settle against him, breathing softly as she drifted back to sleep.

He didn't think he'd be joining her anytime soon.

Alfiti

She pretended to sleep.

It was nicer this way. She felt so comfortable, so safe. She held him. His solid chest, the chest of a warrior. His steady breathing, despite the clear panic. She probably should wake up and explain everything to him. Tell him where they were, and how they'd arrived. Why she'd had to save his life in the manner she did.

She didn't want to. She didn't want to have that conversation. To get rejected.

For now, he let her be his. That was enough for her. To be held by that blood man. She didn't feel the need to dream about a future. She felt so content here, just being held. She didn't want anything else.

His scent was unusual for an elf. Most were almost sickly sweet, as if they'd showered in sugar. This man smelt different. He smelt of sweat and blood. Of stale alcohol, and old food. He smelt of a bar, of work and effort. He smelt like a warrior should, as someone who did whatever needed to be done. He wasn't some elf who prided themselves on beauty and song. He was a man, not a boy.

She snuggled further into his arms, holding him tightly, and felt herself whisper, "I love you."

Alfiti snapped upright, eyes opening wide in terror.

The elf lying on the ground looked up at her, "Are you okay?"

So he hadn't heard her then. Alfiti breathed a sigh of a relief, and lay down facing away from him, but trapping her arm. She pulled the blanket over herself again, muttering and tried to settle her heart. She hadn't admitted it to herself yet. What in the void had possessed her to say it to him?

She had no intention of ever saying that again. Not to that irritating man.

She barely knew him. She knew what he was capable of. He was a warrior at heart. That didn't mean he was honourable, or worthy of her respect. He'd stood up for himself, and protected the Fae. That might have been nothing more than greed. All she really knew about him was he was able to kill. That wasn't exactly on a list of desires when an elf went looking for a future husband.

What would her mother think of him? She'd always been a quick judge of character. Capable of seeing what a person was at their heart from a glance. She was a true Guardian. Able to defend her people against insane threats like Tyr and Vastras. Alfiti wasn't her mother. She'd failed. Eldrasa was overrun with orks, and she was hiding in a pocket dimension inside the Void. Her queen had been infected with the Fel and she hadn't even noticed.

She punched the ground angrily, forgetting she was pretending to sleep.

She felt a rough hand touch her shoulder, "Maybe we should talk, if it's stressing you out."

"Not that." Alfiti growled back at him. Stupid idiot, thinking her world revolved around him. "I was thinking about the war. About the queen."

His voice was filled with concern, "The queen?"

She sighed, rolling onto her back, "Whilst you were fighting the front, the queen was being possessed by Drak'tur. Who then bound and captured F'rir. Eldrasa may well be lost."

"How are we here, then?"

She rolled her eyes, "Wintry and I moved this courtyard into the Void. It's temporary. A

respite. But truth be told, I do not see a way out of this.”

He smiled at her, “You are really blaming yourself? For failing? We have a Fate here. And two things I don’t even know what they are.”

Rude. She sighed, “Wintry is from the First People. And apparently the girlfriend of Kao’el, if what I heard was anything to go by. E’lani is an Entrin. You wouldn’t be here without both of them. Yio. . . Yio is different. She isn’t a Fate, not anymore. She’s something new. Something less.”

“I noticed.” He replied steadily, and Alfiti reconsidered her position. He might not have noticed his casual racism, but he had avoided insulting the Fate. Maybe he was just a self-serving arrogant bastard, after all.

“Are we really in the Void?”

Alfiti nodded, “Yes. It took a crap load of effort to get here. You can’t use magic. It’ll notify Drak’tur.”

“That’s fine.” He replied, “I can’t use magic anyway.”

She turned her head to stare at him in astonishment, “What do you mean you can’t use magic? You’re elfin.”

He winced, “Not something I like to talk about. It’s. . . A remnant. From. . . Talanthia.”

Now she was the rude one, stumbling headlong into the man’s lifetime of shame. She had questions. Could he not use magic at all? Or was it something else? Did he risk getting the attention of the orks if he did? Or was his magic corrupt, and would corrupt him?

The answers might help E’lani.

Yet, she wasn’t willing to put him through that just yet. Not if it meant risking him leaving the blanket. He was warm. Alfiti felt angry. Now she was lying to herself again. She didn’t want him to leave because she didn’t want him to leave, at all. She wanted him to stay, arms around her, not matter what may come. Even if she didn’t know who he was, or even know if she’d continue caring about him. He might well be a bastard. But right now, she wanted him to like her.

That was a weird experience.

She wasn’t quite sure how to go about it. How to get his attention, make him see her as something other than his brutal Guardian. She didn’t want the respect to go anywhere, she enjoyed it. Yet, she did want him to think about kissing her. To be too afraid to act, but let her know all the same.

Damn. Was she a tease?

“My name is Alfiti Algar.” She said softly.

He raised an eyebrow, “Yes, Guardian?”

“Not Guardian.” She sighed, “I gave you my kiss, idiot. There’s no pretending that you and I are just two soldiers fighting a war. If it were just that, this wouldn’t have actually worked, would it?”

“No. . . Alfiti.” He said quietly and she frowned, “You know what, I don’t like that. Go back to the title.”

He laughed and she felt an arm try and tickle under her armpit. She rolled quickly, stealing and wrapping the blanket around herself, “No!”

Alfiti looked over at him, feigning disappointment and pretending to shiver. She rolled back, glaring, “No tickling.”

“No promises.” He replied whipping the blanket into the air, and letting it settle over the both of them. She found herself staring at him, into those serious eyes of his. They were hazel, flecked with black and red. Two magical signatures that she’d begun to recognise. The red was the Fel. The corruption of the orks that spread through everything. The corruption that had already touched his soul. The black was something else. She’d only seen black flecks in the eyes of one person. The Fae who was exiled.

She looked at him sadly, “You have scars, don’t you?”

He nodded tiredly, “Everyone does, given enough time.”

“Not what I meant.” Alfiti replied, “Don’t dismiss it. I’m. . . I’m trying here, idiot.”

“Sorry.” He replied with a half smile, “You see it in my eyes, don’t you? The Fel. It never leaves. It isn’t just in my eyes. It’s in my soul. No one could tell me if I was still eternal, like other elfin, or not. F’rir only spoke to me once about it. She said that it had rewritten me. Made me into something it wanted me to be, but that by freeing me, she had given me that power. To rewrite myself into whatever I could imagine myself to be. I guess that was meant to be a hope. But it isn’t. Because all I can remember, and all I can see for myself, is the horrors of the past. I am what people call me. Childkiller. Butcher of Talanthia. I’m not sure you made the right choice in saving me.”

Alfiti’s hand slammed into his cheek with a resounding thud, causing Wintry to wake up with a start, before settling down again.

“Don’t you ever say that.” She growled, “I am your Guardian. You don’t get to question my choices, oathbreaker.”

He shrugged.

She sighed, “I made my choice, boy. I chose to save you. I’m not taking that promise back. And I am not releasing you from the obligations that come with it, no matter how much of a jerk you are.”

He blinked, surprised. “Wait. . . You really are claiming me, then? Do you even know me?”

“I know enough.” She snapped, “I know that you stood up and fought, when your people needed you. I know that without you, I would already have died in an orkish surprise attack. I know that in war, we don’t get the luxury of second-guessing our actions. I know that tomorrow, you and I will probably be dead. So though I haven’t really got a clue what I feel about you, I’m not going to waste it. And I’m ordering you to respect that.”

He smiled, “Ordering me? Do your orders even matter to an oathbreaker?”

“That wasn’t your choice.” Alfiti replied softly, “I failed the queen. She’s now going through what you did. I don’t blame our queen. I blame myself, for failing to protect her. So why would I blame you?”

“Then why don’t you blame Alphege?” He said, “She was Guardian when Talanthia was infected.”

Alfiti sighed, “My mother did her best. In the end, she succeeded. That’s where we differ. I don’t think we can win this, Kyrus.”

He paused, and smiled, “You know, I don’t think you say my name nearly enough.”

Alfiti felt her ears redden, and she glared at him, "Idiot."

"Maybe." He shrugged, and put his arms around her, pulling her close, "But if I am, then I am a lucky idiot to have a girl like you in my bed."

She very nearly placed her knee inside his pelvic bone. She resisted. "I am not a girl, boy. I am not some tavern wench that'll swoon just because she's getting attention."

Kyrus smiled, "Not my intention. I was just going to make us even."

Alfiti glared at him, "Even?"

"You kissed me." He shrugged, "I thought it fair if I got one of my own to remember."

Her heart rate spiked. She really wanted him to kiss her. Kissing a dying man was emotional, but not like this. All the same, she didn't like the way he was trying to take control of things. Didn't like the way he'd been speaking to her.

Denying him would remind him of his place. But she knew she'd regret it.

Whilst she was still thinking she suddenly felt his lips press against hers, his smell wafting over her, capturing her. He was gentle, but firm. His chest was built like stone, unyielding. His arms were solid, she could feel every sinew and muscle like the vines of an ancient and immovable tree. She lay there, still, as he kissed her. She wanted to grab him, to make him hers, but she didn't.

He broke the kiss.

So he noticed. That was something.

He sighed, "So I guess it didn't mean as much as you thought."

He went to roll over and her elbow slammed into his gut, causing him to cough. Alfiti glared at him, "Know your place, elf."

He rubbed his stomach painfully, and looked at her, "And where is my place, Guardian?"

She smiled, "By my side, of course."

He laughed, shaking his head, "I do not get you, Guardian."

She shrugged. She'd already told him she hadn't figured out her own feelings for him yet.

He sighed, "Where are the others?"

She'd been hoping he wouldn't ask that. There were only this handful of people in the courtyard, despite retreating with a veritable army. An army of veterans and knights, soldiers of the realm.

She hadn't been able to protect them either.

"They fell."

She felt him grab her wrist roughly, rolling over, "What do you mean, they fell? You saved only me? Why?"

Alfiti glared, "I tried to save more. I did. We lost half getting to the palace, and then... The orks were already there. Berserkers, shamen. We all nearly died instantly. We should have died. E'lani protected us. Only us. She tried her best. She stopped an attack that kill three hundred people in its tracks. The others didn't die, Kyrus. It was worse."

He let go of her, sitting up slowly. He tucked the blanket around her and moved away silently.

She couldn't blame him.

She'd just told him she watched her people get massacred. Get infected and corrupted, becoming little more than ghouls.

She'd hidden that, flirting with him as if the world wasn't falling apart.

It was selfish of her. It was also worth it.

He was a good kisser.

Her ears turned red and she rolled onto her side, trying to pretend she didn't hate herself right now.

Alis

She looked at the elf on their knees in front of her. Alis screamed internally as she beheaded them without her facial expression changing at all. She stood up slowly as the elf fell, blood spreading out across the wooden floor and she stretched, “Failures like this are unacceptable. We are elfin. I will not accept these sorts of failures with such merciful punishment in the future. We are better than this, so be better.”

She waved the others out of the room, walking back and forth for a moment. The presence suppressing her seemed to lighten for a moment, and Alis suddenly found herself actually standing.

She rushed to the side of the Fate leaning bloodied and beaten against the wall, grabbing her hands, “F’rir. Run! Now.”

The Fate smiled at her weakly, and vanished.

She breathed a sigh of relief - but it cut off halfway through. Alis stood up, dusting her hands, “Well. That was unfortunate. Though not entirely unexpected. It seems, your highness, that you truly do have a strong will. I give you just a moment of freedom, and you try and destroy my plans. I guess I will refrain from granting you that in the future.”

Alis still felt triumphant, even as she faced the hideous imprisonment in her own skin. Watching as she killed and ordered her people to betray their beliefs. She was a puppet. This was why she had forgiven the oathbreakers in the last war against the orks. She knew they had no control of their actions. That so many of them had tried to fight, but there was nothing to fight.

Alis couldn’t control her actions, no matter how much she might want to. Her only opportunity came at the hands of her enemy. Her only hope to escape was to cooperate. She could understand why some of the traitors had. They had hoped to be trusted long enough to escape. Hoped to do as little damage as possible, so that they might be able to turn their wrath against the enemy in the future.

It didn’t work that way. She wasn’t about to surrender. It might be different, after the days turned to months, and months to years. Eventually she would break. No will could survive forever. No one was without their limits, not even the gods themselves. Despite that, for now, she would resist in the only way open to her. She couldn’t stop the crimes being committed in her name, but she would not aide them.

Wintry

She sat up slowly, pulling the fur around her shoulders tightly.

She'd managed to transport a handful of things from her bathhouse to where they were, with a smaller circle. It was just as well. The Void was freezing, even in a tiny pocket dimension like this one. The heat was bleeding out through the thin air and into the endless Void. Even if the orks didn't find them, staying here without trying to recreate it was a death sentence. It needed a god to remake it, or at least a Fae.

The power to create a realm was a rare thing amongst most peoples, and it wasn't something that Wintry had ever taken the time to learn. She'd had her world, in her time. Afterwards, she had to stay hidden, to try and protect Kao'el.

In short, she didn't have the magic to make this place safe.

Wintry inched closer to the red coals of the fire, picking up a piece of charcoal to quickly rewrite the symbol next to it on the ground. The flames flared back into being, and she held up her hands, warming herself. She felt calm looking into the flames. As if the world wasn't dying. As if she wasn't caught up in a war again. This was the quiet before the storm.

Wars were filled with battles. Some were defining, like the collapse of the defence of Eldrasa. Others were pointless, neither side gaining the upper hand. Just wasting lives in a desperate but failed attempt. But no war was won in a day. Wars were won when two people could stand and speak. When neither side could find a situation they were happy with, but it was enough.

Drak'tur wouldn't negotiate this time. The elfin realms were finished. It might take time for them to know it. Endless battles, thousands of lives lost. But the war was already won. They could fight, and they would fight, but there was no one able to stop what that ork was turning into. Like Trei, he actually would be able to stop a war in a day. He was something new. A weapon that no one could defend against.

There was a snap in the air, and Wintry looked over as one of her traps snared something attempting to enter their pocket dimension.

Yio flew to her feet, waking up ready to fight.

Wintry waved slowly, "Hey, F'rir."

The Fate groaned, falling over. Her sister caught her, looking over her, "A few burns. Nothing too major."

F'rir just grunted. That was the point of the snare. It sucked the energy out of whoever tried to pierce the barrier. Left them able to talk, to be interrogated, but not to do anything. Not to fight.

Yio sat her sister by the fire, wrapping a blanket around her, "You escaped?"

F'rir nodded slowly, "He got... Distracted. By you, I think."

Wintry stood up, letting the blanket drop with regret, and walked over to a small bag of food she'd dragged in, and began to go through it. It was all long term rations, so most of it tasted like crap. Like actual crap from a horse. However, one or two things were more edible. All of it was good for maintaining high amounts of energy. Survival foods.

She picked up a metallic sleeve and walked back to the fire. She opened the sleeve a crack and drew a small circle with some charcoal. Some water poured out of the air above the circle, and into the sleeve. She then propped it amongst some of the smaller coals, waiting for it to boil.

“Distracted by us, F’rir?”

The Fate nodded, “He executed an elf for failing to stop you. . . He’s taken control. The orks pretend they’re serving the elfin queen. You’ve been declared traitors to the throne, and he says you attempted to seize the throne. The orks were sent to aide the queen, because she couldn’t trust her Guardian.”

Wintry felt her ears flatten, “Are they buying it?”

“Some.” F’rir shrugged, “I didn’t see much.”

She could see the damage to the Fate’s face. She’d clearly been tortured, but from where the blows had landed it seemed more likely that it was sport than an attempt to extract information. No torturer worth their salt rattled the brain like that.

Wintry sighed heavily, “Well, thanks for sending Kao. He’s survived.”

F’rir glanced over at the two sleeping elfin, and smiled slowly. “Neither of them know it yet. But they will.”

Wintry poured the boiling sleeve of soup into a bowl, and then handed it to the Fate. “You need to restore your strength.”

Yio scratched her head, “It’s time for breakfast anyway, isn’t it?”

Wintry shrugged, “We’re not inside the normal flow of time. Who could tell?”

E’lani sat up, yawning, and then stared at the newcomer in concern. F’rir waved, “Hey. You’re not dead. That’s good.”

The Entrin smiled tightly, and tapped the fresh moss covering her chest like a scar. Wintry smiled, “That’s Kao’el’s doing. She pulled a lot of the taint out.”

F’rir nodded, “I know. I’m still a Fate, unlike my sister.”

Wintry winced, “That means. . .”

“I have to leave soon.” F’rir replied, and shrugged, “The others are giving me some leeway. As compensation for my face.”

“Goddess.” A shocked voice spoke, and Wintry grinned over at the nervous Guardian, who was yanking the blanket up around her and trying to pretend she wasn’t sleeping next to another elf. Modesty was cute, especially when it was because of someone who knew exactly what was going on between two people.

F’rir nodded, “Why don’t you wake him up? That’ll be everyone.”

Wintry turned back as she heard the Guardian insulting the man she was trying to pretend she didn’t adore. It wasn’t easy to hide your feelings from the world. From yourself? That’s easy. We all lie to ourselves. We tell ourselves we can do things that we’ve never done before. We tell ourselves that things like hope exist. We believe in our dreams, despite the harshness of reality. But when we tried to lie about the things others could see, it spoke loudly.

She turned back to making breakfast for the rest. She’d have to water the ration packs down for them. F’rir needed the strength, considering what the snare had done to her. They couldn’t afford for the Fate to die before she returned to directing events.

“Alis is possessed by Drak’tur. She’s claiming the orks are under her command.” F’rir informed the rest, “Apparently you all attempted to take the throne. She’s put you as the leader, Guardian. Apparently you wanted the throne for yourself.”

The soldier clenched his fists angrily, his face darkening. Wintry did not like what she saw in his aura. That was a violent streak she hadn't seen in a very long time. It belonged to a beserker. A warrior who would keep fighting even in the throes of death. An unpredictable and dangerous man.

"It makes sense." The Guardian whispered, obviously trying to cope with the events.

Wintry passed a bowl to Yio, "He's coming for us next, isn't he?"

"Yes and no." F'rir replied, "There's two major failures. Your capture is one. The other is... A prison camp, in the heart of the orkish lands. Apparently there's been a revolt. The guards and prisoners united against some of the other guards. The prison is now abandoned. Where they went, Drak'tur was uncertain."

Yio laughed, "That's my girl."

"Who?" The Guardian asked.

"Kru." Yio replied, "The Fae. She must have been captured near the start of this. She won't stay down. She's not just a warrior. She's a leader, a decent one at that."

Wintry frowned, "Can we rely on Kru to keep the fight going? Or should we be trying to meet up with her?"

"She's Fae." The Guardian said sadly, "My people won't trust her. If she fights, it'll confirm their fears. That I really did revolt against the queen."

F'rir shrugged, "Worse than that. She has orks on her side. So Drak'tur has all sorts of propaganda he can throw around. But it might not be a bad idea to join her, anyway. She can defend herself. And she could do with a friend."

Wintry passed a bowl to the Guardian, and another to E'lani. "We can't stay here forever. That's certain. The realm will collapse back to where it was in two more days, but we'll freeze to death before then. Even the fire is barely warm. We need to find a way to get from here to somewhere else untraced before either of those things happens."

Yio waved idly, "I have some ideas on that, we can work on them together, Wintry."

The Guardian glared, "I have some knowledge as well."

"We need you to work on something else." Yio replied, "If Wintry and I can get us there, you need to be prepared for an attack. Like F'rir just said, Kru has orks on her side. So you need to stop an attack by orks without actually wiping them out. I thought that you and our gallant bartender here would be best for that."

The Guardian glared at the man next to her, "I'd rather not."

Wintry nodded, "Yio, they're only just realising how hot each other is. Best not."

She felt the withering looks from the pair and grinned at them. It was true. They were only just beginning to realise their attraction. Best not to give them an excuse to give up on the chance of being together. Not before battle. Hope brought strength, devastation brought suicidal tendencies.

Yio shrugged, "So, who wants defence?"

"I'll work with E'lani." The Guardian stated flatly.

The Entrin nodded her agreement, still slurping noisily at her bowl.

Wintry sighed, "I guess you can keep the fire going, then."

The soldier shook his head, "I can't use magic. Even circles."

Yio glared at him, “Oh for crap’s sake. You’re infected with the Fel.”

Wintry looked at him in surprise, spying the flecks of red in his eyes, “Not just Fel. What is that...?”

“Not worth talking about.” F’rir interrupted, “I put it there. Just leave him be.”

There was a moment of tension between F’rir and Yio, but the sisters relented. Yio sighed and glared at him, “So what can you do?”

He shrugged, “I can fight. I’m not much use whilst we’re here.”

F’rir laughed, “The key to the coming war, Kyrus, is the link between Drak’tur and Trei, which goes via Alphege. If you know a way to break that, it provides the opportunity to end this war. Make some plans.”

The man nodded slowly as Wintry passed him a bowl.

There was something deeply disturbing about the man.

Yio

It had been nice to see her sister, even if all it did was reinforce how much of a risk she'd taken. She wouldn't be returning to the celestials. She'd given up her entire life, her entire perspective, just to make sure that the rest of the world had a chance to get through this. All the realms could still vanish if she screwed up. There was no one who could really appreciate what she had done. No one who could understand what it meant.

The last celestial to give up her powers had been Sumner - and she'd killed herself to create the Fae. Her reincarnation, Summer, didn't have all the memories of the original. She may as well be a brand new person. There wasn't anyone who understood what Yio had done.

Like always, she was alone.

She sighed and finished scratching the symbols in the circle, surrounding the others. She looked at Wintry, who was the anchor, and nodded, "You ready for this? This is going to be rough. No channel, no shift. Just a deconstruction and transmission."

The woman smiled at her, "How do you think we used to get around? Do it."

Yio slammed her hands down on the circle, which burst into light bright enough it seared her eyes painfully. Yio flinched, looking away from the circle, feeling her eyes watering.

She sighed as the circle stopped glowing, and stood up slowly. She'd sent them on their way. The actual transport relied on Wintry, but when they arrived she would be basically defenceless, and would have to rely on the Guardian and E'lani. Maybe the soldier. It wasn't the most optimal of situations. Yio was trapped here until they arrived, and then her own transport might arrive in the middle of a battle. She just had to hope the others would defend the circle long enough for her to arrive safely.

There was every chance that Drak'tur wouldn't notice their arrival. This magic was beyond ancient, tracing it was next to impossible. If you could even detect it at all. It was the same sort of magic that powered runic weapons. Ancient words of power, binding magic that already existed in place. But it came with similar drawbacks. A limit to the power that could be used, a series of actions that were needed to activate the magic, and a recharge time. None of which were really optimal for battle. It was why runed weapon had become little more than research tools. They weren't useful weapons of war.

Yio sighed as she saw the magic in the circle subside.

This was it.

She stepped into the centre of the circle, and prepared herself. She swallowed nervously, and then crouched low to the ground and placed her hands. The circle lit up, and she resisted the urge to scream as she felt her soul tear apart, piece by piece accelerating into the air, flying apart and through the Void.

Sights and sounds that made no sense flew through her as pieces of Yio moved through the Void at blinding speed. She saw Summer and Trei, laughing and holding hands in a valley. She saw Astrian screaming, as an ork tore out her throat. She saw Kru standing over a thousand bodies, something like black dust falling from her hands, her eyes glowing red.

Yio screamed as she saw herself. As she circled herself. Images of her own face spread out fractally, reflecting like the shards of a crystal. Every surface, every space was filled with herself, and she it all.

Just as soon as the vision appeared, it was gone, replaced by a stranger sight. An empty darkness, except for a single shadow. He stood tall, and broad. Hands wielding warhammers like they were small toys. The ork growled softly as she flew directly towards him. He held up the weapons, roaring a sound of triumph.

Yio couldn't change directions, she couldn't increase or slow her speed.

All that was left was determination.

Her will, above all others.

She gritted her teeth, despite the absence of any physical form, and charged into the ork.

It exploded in a roar of rage and blood, and Yio hit the ground, rolling. She flung herself upright as the ground exploded into black flames where she'd been lying. She spun around in a circle, tossing up a shield of golden light and deflecting shots of magical Fel.

Yio looked around in the burned out circle where she'd landed, but she couldn't see anyone. She could see their things discarded, a kicked over bag of food supplies. So they'd been attacked the moment they arrived. Yet, she didn't know exactly when that was, because of the non-linear nature of the Void and travel through it.

The Fate held her own, the shield slowly forming up into a sphere, a perfect sphere without imperfection, surrounding her in every direction. She glared out of it at the orkish shamen who ceased their attack. One of them walked towards her slowly, wielding two warhammers. They looked like toys in his hands. So this was what she'd seen, right before she'd hit the world. He'd dragged her here. Diverting her from another time of arrival.

The ork sneered, bouncing a warhammer playfully on her shell, causing it to crackle with magic and her hair to stand on end for a moment. "Doesn't it want to come out and play?"

Yio smiled at him, "Oh you don't want me to play, ork."

"I am called Mo'ktar, little elf. I am the one who will bring all of you traitors down."

Yio blinked, looking at him, "Seriously? You think I'm an elf? What the hell."

The ork glared at her, considering, "If not an elf, then what are you?"

"I am Yio!" She shouted angrily, her shield suddenly becoming a wave of magic that swept the area, knocking all the orks off their feet. She stood over the groaning ork, placing a boot carefully on his throat, "I am like nothing else, ork. I am not an elf. I am not a Fae. I am not human. There is no word to describe what I am. I am a fallen celestial. A mortal, with the power of all the gods. I am a fact of the timeline. I exist because I will myself to exist. I am nothing more, and nothing less, than who I am."

Mo'ktar looked up at her, the red in his eyes sparkling. A different voice emerged from his throat, "I am Drak'tur. Speaker of the Orks. You are a Fate. You have no business interfering. Leave."

She grinned at him, "Didn't you hear me, ork? I am not a celestial anymore. I am fallen. I am mortal. You could kill me, if you tried hard enough."

She stepped back, looking at the orks beginning to rise to their feet, and she reached out to the ether of magic surrounding her. She grabbed it, flinched as the veins in her arms burned and turned black, she pulled it gently, feeling the edges of the spiderweb, and then yanked.

The orks collapsed and she released the magic, wincing at the black flames that spurted along

the length of her arm, scarring her.

“I am Yio, Drak’tur.” She smiled down at the defeated ork, “And I am coming, for you.”

The ork seemed to fall unconscious. Released by it’s master.

She didn’t have time to waste. She might have showed off, but there was a limit to how much she could do without dying. Yio, burst off the ground, shielding herself from sight for a moment before releasing all magic. She had to disappear into the forest.

She paused in a tree branch, looking down. She could see a battle, or the aftermath of one. This was where everyone else had arrived. She touched a broken branch, looking at how it had dried. Four days. She’d arrived four days after everyone else. Damn.

Beneath her though, was something that caught her attention far more.

Yio dropped to the ground silently, walking over slowly. She didn’t want to believe it. Didn’t want to admit it. Amongst the dead and scavenged corpses of the orks, was another. Something frail, something small. Something grey.

She fell next to the impaled body, looking at the sightless eyes of the half-eaten body, and she touched the cheek gently.

No one deserved this.

To die and be forgotten.

Yio stood up, and pushed a small spell against the ground. It collapsed into a grave immediately, and Yio gently lowered Wintry’s body into it, before closing it. She wasn’t sure what to do, she just knew she needed to remember this, to pay homage to this.

She was dead.

Her old friend. A woman of will and strength. A woman who had cursed the gods and fought them. She had always been a giant amongst mortals. Too bad she’d fought an army by herself. More than a dozen dead orks lay around her. All of them showed signs of death by magic. Bones melted, bodies twisted and contorted. Flesh replaced with something that wasn’t. This was the work of a warrior, but everyone had their limits.

Even her. Even a woman brave enough to become the consort of the creator of the ’verse. A woman brave enough to stand up and fight when she thought the gods were overstepping, trying to force destiny on her people.

Despite her crimes, there should be nothing but respect for this woman.

Yio picked an acorn from a tree, and carefully planted it over the grave. At least she could do this. At least she could remember the rites of Wintry’s people, even if they were now gone, forever. The first people. Every other race was a shadow, a poor attempt at reconstructing what Kao had created. They were gone now. The only thing close to what they were was Drak’tur, a man who had perverted himself, thinking he could create something better than what he was.

His existence was an insult to the memory of Wintry. To the memory of her people.

Yio moved further into the forest, quietly walking, as tears fell beside her footsteps.

Kru

She looked at the burned map on the table as the elf walked into the tent. “Report.”

He saluted briefly, and then spread his feet placing his hands behind his back, “Ten orks, discovered dying, a half day’s march from here. Near the circle.”

Kru nodded, barely acknowledging it. She’d been waiting to hear that Yio had returned since the others had arrived. She doubted she would fare any better than any of them. The enemy was too strong, too powerful. Without mercy. “What else?”

“Three raids. The orks are hitting our supply lines. Quick, fast and violent. In and out before we have a chance to respond.” Deslin replied, indicating positions on the map.

Kru sighed, her wings shaking. He was right, of course. The orks were pushing their supplies to the limit. Getting food to her army was of paramount importance. She’d established a network of portals, joining Kruin, the original camp in the orkish lands, and her camps scattered through Eldrasa. There were still limits to what she could do, even if the limits were beyond anything she experienced when using pure magic.

The Fel had opened doors, but only so many.

Hope was nothing more than a dying sound, an echo of her own soldiers last breaths. Drak’tur was experienced with the long drawn-out campaigns of battle and she wasn’t. She was a Fae. War was anathema to her people, a representation of all that could go wrong in a person. They were barely holding the line. He was bringing hell down upon them, time and again. He would win this, in the end.

She’d felt hope when she first seized control of the Fel. She’d felt her heart soar when she heard that the others had returned to the realm. Those hopes had died quickly, along with the ones who brought them to her.

There wasn’t any realistic way to defeat the monster, not whilst he held the palace, and the dying elfin Guardian inside, bound forever to the god that had exiled her to this world. He didn’t care, he wasn’t stepping in.

So long as Alphege lived, they would die.

Because of him.

Yio

She slowed as she neared a narrowing point in the trail. Here the forest was dense, and dark. She could smell the blood on the wind.

Someone had died here.

Yio leaped upwards, landing on a tree branch far above the ground easily and gracefully. She looked at the corpse hanging off it, the elf. They were young, and their armour shined too brightly. They were inexperienced. And the head had been torn clean off. The body had fallen here. Probably tossed into the air by a rampaging ork.

She looked down at the forest from the vantage point, counting the bodies as she saw them.

At least a dozen elfin had died here, attacked by an enemy who was faster than they were prepared for. The entire unit had died before they had a chance to react, to save themselves. The orks had ambushed them, and in their inexperience, they hadn't expected it.

In the middle of the area ahead though, there was something else.

Yio cleared the dead, and landed beside the monument. A warhammer, slammed into the ground with force enough to break it in every direction. This was an orkish sign of honour to the fallen dead. It wasn't something they did for many of their own. It required tremendous respect. This was given to a soldier who had died fighting an impossible battle, without giving up, and inflicting enormous casualties on their enemy.

She winced, feeling the horror wash over her as she saw the corpse leaning up against the hammer.

It was elfin.

An elf had earned the respect of his attackers. He had fought long and hard enough that they took the time to remember him after they killed him.

Yio crouched in front of him, trying not to feel anything. She desperately didn't want to know. Didn't want to see this. Didn't want to know she felt anything at all for the man who had done little more than irritate her.

But she knew he deserved the respect the orks had given him.

He wasn't a powerful elf by birth. He wasn't blessed by the gods. He wasn't a holy warrior, he was a man ashamed of his past.

He'd made up for whatever wrongs he had done.

He'd paid the price.

Yio stood up, looking down at Kyros' body. Looking at where an axe had torn completely through his shoulder and halfway into his chest. He'd died in agony. Unable to fight, unable to breathe.

Because she was late.

Kao

She watched the darkness spreading out over Eldrasa.

It was over.

They'd failed. All of them.

It was all she could do to watch. To keep watching. After what had happened. After watching the woman she loved fall to the ground, dead by the hand of an angry ork. The blood of the last of her kind, falling in a forest that didn't care. The hungry ground had soaked it in, as the orks continued their hunt, not even pausing to notice what they had killed.

To notice who.

Wintry. Not just a powerful mage. The powerful mage. The woman who brought magic into the world. There would be no Fel without her. No orks, no Fae, no elfin. None of them would exist without her, and none of them spared a single thought for her.

This was the woman who told the gods they couldn't just interfere whenever they wanted, and now she died because the gods were too afraid of someone like her appearing again to allow Kao to resurrect her. She was gone, because her legacy stood the test of time. Because no celestial could ever forget the face of the warrior queen as she shattered their dwellings.

The gods split off into their own realms, because Wintry had invaded theirs. There was no palace of gods anymore, because Wintry was the one who burned it to the ground. She was one who became the first godkiller. She was the one who brought fear into the hearts of the creatures that had thought they were above everyone.

Trei was nothing new. He thought gods should reside with their people, that they were nothing more than their people. Congratulations. You rediscovered what caused Wintry to lay down her life in the first place. What made her steal from the gods, to fight them. He was the conclusion. He didn't have to fight, because she already had. She was the beginning. The beginning of everything.

She paid a price that no one else even could.

And Kao was just supposed to accept that. Accept that she was dead. Accept that Yio was the one to bury her, after the forest was allowed to feast on her corpse for three days. Three days left out to the elements. Kao hadn't even been allowed to grant her that dignity.

Wintry had earned her place amongst the gods. She was a figure like they'd never known. She had brought stability and peace to every realm by her own bloodshed. She deserved nothing less than ascension. Others had been given it, throughout time. Hero, the human who scourged the Faen realms, was granted it. He was nothing more than a butcher with a rage that never died. Drak'tur had already been assured of his place by Wrodin.

Yet Kao wasn't allowed to grant this to Wintry.

Because she dared to stand up to the gods when no one else would.

The goddess stood there, watching, tears pouring from her vague form that would take some imagination to be described as a body. Wintry sacrificed everything for a lost cause. Her death would mean nothing, in the end. That's what the others wanted. Wanted the world to forget this amazing person who stood up, despite her terror. A mere mundane who had crept into the palace of the gods, and stolen their power from them. The eternal flame.

It wasn't fair.

Kao could feel the Void itself beginning to resonate with what she was feeling. She created it. It existed because she imagined it. It was a part of herself. Yet the others were growing nervous. About to ask her to restrain herself.

How could she?

She'd loved Wintry from the first moment.

It had been so hard for Kao not to grin when she saw that timid child, ears flat against her head, moving through the shadows towards the flame. To a mundane she might have been silent, but to Kao she had been a clumsy oaf. Disturbing the air, the ground. Effecting everything around her as she pushed towards a goal.

Kao had been proud when she saw the determination in her creation. A determination to change. To take the status quo and make something new from it. She hadn't acted that day, when Wintry stole her own power, because it was the right thing to do.

Wintralassa had been right. The gods should not be dictating terms to the realm. It was the pettiness of the gods that had brought the war afterwards. Too afraid to treat their own creations as their equal. Too stupid to see that was precisely why they were created. To become something more than they were. It wasn't blind obedience and worship that Kao desired. She wanted kinship. To understand the world through the eyes of another is blessed thing, not a curse.

Even when she had ruled the realm with an iron fist, she had still halted, now and again. Because she was asked to, by a mundane. They had nothing to offer her that she did not already have. Yet, if they asked, she would listen. That was the point. It was not a monarchy that she desired, it was a family. She was their mother, and they were her children.

Wintry had seen that, without it ever having been explained to her. She knew what was right, and what was wrong, and she had been determined to bring justice by any means that were available to her.

And now she was dead by some unnamed ork.

The 'verse should have shaken at her death, cried out in agony. The ground should have broken, and the sky torn.

Yet, when she fell, there was nothing.

The fight hadn't even stopped.

It wasn't right.

"You can't interfere."

Kao glared at Sarin, "If I did, I'd be rejecting the memory of Wintry. I'm not so full of hate that I can't remember her life's work. I'm not an idiot."

The Fate smiled grimly, and turned back to the world, "They will remember her. Whether they want to or not."

She heard the anger in the voice, and she felt it. "I'm surprised, Sarin. I didn't think you cared about her at all."

"She made amends." Sarin replied, "We didn't. We have all hidden behind the treaties. Forced the new races to negotiate with us. We're still plying our power and trying to get what we want out of them all... But she didn't. She was content to be left alone. It's all she ever sought. She had the power to remake any realm. To create her own and a wage a war to wipe out the

worship of the gods. She had every right to do it. Yet, she didn't. She ran a near-abandoned bath house in the backend of beyond. Wintry was better than any of us."

Kao looked away, "She always was, Sarin. We're the ones who created that war."

"I was wrong." Sarin replied.

Kao looked at the Fate in surprise again. She'd never thought she'd hear that admission.

"I was wrong, about everything." Sarin said again, fighting back an anger that seemed to explode into her aura, "And I'm to blame for Wintry's death. The time diffusion. There's one person who could have delayed Yio like that. This didn't happen because of the synchronisation with the Void."

Kao glared at her, "You noticed. Finally."

"That bastard." Sarin shook her head, and then smiled at Kao, "I'm still right though. You can't interfere. If you did, the worlds would end. All the celestials would be coming out of the woodwork, and then there would be nothing, again."

Kao looked at her with concern, "What are you going to do, Sarin?"

"Kill Drak'tur." The Fate replied simply, "And then probably be executed. But I won't let this be forgotten. I won't let Wintry be forgotten."

Kao waved a hand, "Look at the Fel. This isn't reversible. Even if Drak'tur dies, Eldrasa is lost. It's infected. Look at the spread. It's hitting the other realms. Calvenus chose a bad time to open a trading port. If the Fae are becoming infected, then so are the humans. It's over. That man has made us all obsolete."

Sarin smiled, "Well, I guess I just have to break the rules, then."

Deslin

The elf looked at the ork towering more than twice his height, and raised an eyebrow, “Come again?”

He’d never been this confident before. Not before the Fel. He’d spent most of his time as a prisoner covered in piss, blood and tears. Then Kru had found him. Here was a Fae he’d been ordered to kill to prove he was a candidate to be a Guardian, she wiped out an entire orkish prison camp on her own. He doubted that the Guardian would have succeeded in her own efforts.

The ork placed a hand the size of a small boulder on his shoulder, “Why don’t you run along, little elf? Let our leader know that we failed. She can judge us.”

Deslin slammed forward, his elbow crushing the stomach of the creature. It tumbled to the ground, gasping and retching. It’d die, in a day or so. The elf looked at the rest of the beaten war party, “Does anyone want to guess why I haven’t gone to Kru, yet?”

They all looked down, their confidence shattered at the impending death of their leader.

“Because you’re not worth her time.” Deslin spat, “That’s why she appointed me as her First. Make no mistake, I am the First. I may not be an ork, or even a Fae. I am an elf. Which means that life, your life, is granted only when I desire it.”

He looked back at the dying ork, and reached out. The creature screamed briefly, a howling sound. What was left of its soul became red dust floating in his hand. Corrupted by the Fel, the green dust of life. Deslin considered it for a moment, and then rather than absorbing the Fel, he let it dissipate into the air.

He turned back, “I am the First. You, are failures. Now, why did you fail?”

The second-in-command stepped forward nervously, “We fled.”

“From what?” Deslin asked, glaring.

“A pink-haired woman.” The ork replied, “I don’t know what species. We didn’t stay to find out. She killed everyone else at the circle. One blow. She somehow turned a shielding spell into a weapon. We panicked.”

Deslin smiled, “Thank the gods for the orkish survival instinct. You encountered Yio. We detected her return some time ago. Why did she attack you?”

The commander looked at his feet, a strange posture for such a proud people.

Deslin kicked the empty corpse by his feet, “Did he order an attack when she appeared?”

“Yes.” A different ork whispered, before being glared at by their comrades.

“Step forward.” Deslin commanded, and the female ork did as instructed.

He considered her. She was an archer, and was small compared to most other orks. Her eyes were interesting. They showed a depth he rarely saw amongst the other orks. It made sense, as an archer. She saw what the others didn’t. She was spared the bloodlust, at least at long range. It made her thoughtful, and less brutal. She wasn’t a hammer like these other tools.

“Kneel.”

The ork flinched, but did as she was instructed. She didn’t bow her head though, glaring directly at him. Deslin touched one of her tusks gently, playfully. “You others, take note of this. Here is an ork who is willing to see the world. To notice it. There is a cost to that. Watch.”

He took her other tusk in his hand, angling her head up to his, glaring into her red eyes.

The Fel poured from his mouth like a torrent. The ork shook, trying to free herself as the Fel poured over her like a waterfall. She screamed as the fire began to burn, as her skin lit up with black flames. As her eyes burned out of her sockets, being replaced with blue fire. He held her easily as he continued to pour power into her. To transform her. The skin along her back split open, hollow bones emerging for a moment before the feathered wings grew out from them. Her hoofed feet spread with a shattering of bone as toes began to form, giving her the feet of a primate.

Deslin sighed heavily, releasing her, "The cost is responsibility."

The ork looked at him in astonishment, and he waved her to her feet, "You are now the First of this band of rogues. What is your name?"

The woman smiled at him, flexing the wings on her back slowly, "Cluuth, sir."

"No need for the 'sir'." He laughed, "You are now mine. I don't need you to call me a title for me to know you are my possession. You are now the first of your kind, Cluuth. A crossing of ork, ghou and lich. Kru designed it. She's been asking for me to find someone worthy to carry this power since this all began. From what I can tell, you will need this power to knock these orks into something worthy of being noticed."

The woman bowed her head slightly, and turned to face her unit, "On your knees, runts."

The orks moved slowly, hesitantly, but the knelt all the same.

Deslin smiled, he'd chosen wisely. She was already attempting to reinforce the authority he had given her on her own. To avoid problems in the future, without needing to rely on him or Kru. A decent enough leader.

"Now, Cluuth." He began, "You and yours are to scout the palace at the city of Eldrasa. Return when you have something to report."

It was an impossible task, at least with just orks. He was hoping she would give them the edge they needed.

They desperately needed to find Alphege, and kill her.

Or this entire war would be pointless.

Mo'ktar

He walked slowly beside the other champions, crossing the uneven terrain carefully whilst the scouts rushed ahead, detailing the path of this strange woman through the forest.

He hadn't encountered the traitors again, not since their battle at the circle. A battle this woman had interrupted. A creature capable of stopping them all in their tracks with little effort.

It wasn't something he had expected to encounter in the elfin realms. Elfin were weak and small. Their only skill was Gaian magic, but they all thought it evil to use as a method of war, a weakness of their culture. As a species they relied on a single champion to defend them all. It was pathetic. His band of orks might be different than most, but every single one of them was a champion.

Yet, all the same, this woman had felled them all.

She was a most interesting specimen.

He paused at the sight of the battle, and one of the scouts waiting. "What happened here? Why is there an honoured totem?"

The scout pointed to the totem, "A single warrior fought this band. He killed twelve by his own hand. Three were killed by another, who fled, whilst that warrior held the rest of the band at bay. He died when an ork scarified themselves for a killing blow."

Mo'ktar's eyebrows raised. "What species was this warrior?"

"Elfin." The scout said with disgust.

Could it be possible? Did the elfin have other champions amongst them? Perhaps by another title. Or retired. It was obvious that there was more here than met the eye.

He pointed to the hammer standing upright on the ground, "What one has sundered, may none repair."

The rest of the band turned and bowed towards the totem, "What has fallen, will be remembered."

The orkish band leader bowed low, and then turned and looked at the discarded corpses of the fallen, "Do any recognise these remains?"

One of his regulars nodded, "Aye. Those two were guards at Fal'alorian."

"Traitors," Mo'ktar spat on the ground, "Servants of our enemy. Leave their remains where they lie. Let the forest feast upon them. Continue."

The scout ran ahead again, and he began to walk slowly. The regular who had spoken, a warrior called Dan'sa, moved up beside him, "They were not traitors, Mo'ktar. If they have aided their enemy, they must not have had a choice."

Mo'ktar nodded, speaking quietly, "It does so appear. Look around us, we're further from our camps than ever before, and closer to the enemy. Yet the Fel seems stronger here than even in the city."

Dan'sa breathed heavily around his tusks, glaring around. "The enemy has mastered the Fel."

"That is all that makes sense." Mo'ktar growled, "Even if it makes little sense at all. The Fel is a gift of our lord. How could it be stolen by an enemy? It would not obey them."

Dan'sa smiled grimly. Neither of them would discuss it with the others, but it wouldn't be long

before they worked it out as well. There was something very wrong in this world that they had been plunged into.

Something that defied everything they had been raised to believe.

Mo'ktar did not mind challenging his beliefs. It was a necessity of survival. It was not always the strong that survived, but sometimes the lucky. That thought alone was heresy amongst most of his people, but it had enabled him to become one of the strongest champions in service to his lord.

Yet, he did not like the thought that someone else could control the Fel.

It did not just grant power, but also control. No ork could resist a master of the Fel. Their society was predicated upon the trustworthiness of those that could. Every Fel user bowed to Lord Drak'tur. Every now and then a shaman would attempt to make a name for themselves. A small rebellion, here and there. And every time, Lord Drak'tur simply took back his gift, leaving the shaman without their power, surrounded by orks who were no longer being controlled.

It ended in devastation.

This was different. These orks were fighting for the death for someone who continued to wield the Fel, and wield it against his master.

No elf could touch the Fel. It would burn out their precious little hearts instantly.

It was everything that they were not.

Perhaps this woman they hunted would provide a clue. She was heading straight into the heart of enemy territory.

Yio

She paused as the ground exploded in front of her, raising an eyebrow at the dramatic entry.

Steam drifted off the naked body slowly, as they stood up, swaying.

Yio yawned, waiting.

They pulled the pink hair behind them and frowned, “You got a hair tie?”

Yio rolled her eyes, pulling one out of a pocket and handed over, “Why are you here? And why are you naked?”

“Same answer.” Sarin replied, and turned, smiling guiltily, “I’m not supposed to be here. Wrodin is kinda pissed I’m interfering.”

Yio blinked. Then the answer sank in. She looked at her eldest sister in surprise. The sister who had always refused to interfere. The sister who got pissed off she’d gone and talked to Trei. “You’re breaking the rules?”

“He killed Wintry. It’s my fault.” Sarin growled angrily and Yio glared, “Who? The bastard ork?”

Sarin smiled tightly, “I resurrected Tyr. As a slave. He delayed your arrival.”

Yio clenched her fists, “The fuck you say? You resurrected the man who managed to destroy the goddamned lifestream?”

Her sister nodded grimly, “I thought he might be useful when this war got here. I was wrong. He’s a dick. He’s trying to help Drak’tur of all damn people. He could have made things worse by helping Kru, but no, he has to choose the damned maniacal obsessed idiot.”

Yio shook her head, “So. What now?”

“First, I break a few hundred rules.” Sarin grinned at her, “You’ve got your powers back.”

She stared in surprise as the timelines swam into view. It wasn’t the same. She’d spent too much time used to one perspective. But she could now cross them, traverse them. See what could be, what would be, and what must not be.

All the timelines were converging, heading to a future she knew must not happen, yet she couldn’t see a future that didn’t arrive at that point. “Oh crap.”

Her sister stretched, “Is this what it’s like to be you, Yio? No responsibilities... Able to do whatever I feel like... It’s certainly strange.”

Yio rolled her eyes, “You’ve broken more rules than I ever have, already.”

Sarin grinned at her, “And I don’t care. I’m a dead woman anyway. But first, I’m going to make sure everyone remembers Wintry. And Tyr regrets ever having pissed me off.”

Then she was gone.

Yio shook her head, and then turned and caught the barbed arrow out of the air casually, “You know, ork, that’s a heck of a way to greet someone who has come to help Kru.”

The ork dropped out of the tree a few hundred meters away, and began moving towards her, “How could you help our master?”

“My name is Yio.” She replied, “And that, I assure you, is an answer.”

The creature glared at her, and she saw the corruption lying there. The burning eyes, and black feathered wings. The ork thought these made her different. Made her something new. But it didn't. Not really. All orks were born of the Fel. They were all corrupt. It was just a matter of power to make them like her, or some hideous transformation beyond her.

"So, your name is Cluuth." Yio nodded, "Interesting. Camp's that way? I can find my way. You have a mission. Follow it."

The ork growled angrily, spreading her wings, and Yio glared, "I spared you before. Not for your cowardice, but your link to Kru. I saw you. Do you really think it was chance or luck that allowed you to survive?"

The ork settled slightly, "You two."

They were small, weaker orks. Apparently so brimming with anger they didn't realise just how weak they were. Cluuth smiled at her, "They will escort you to the camp."

Yio tapped her chin, "Yeah... No. See ya."

She vanished, reappearing inside the tent, "Hiya, Kru."

The Fae spun, a sword of darkness appearing in the air and pointing at her throat. Yio glared at the Fae's face, "Well, haven't we grown up. No more death wish. That's something, at least."

"How did you get here so quickly?" The Fae growled, "And where were you?"

Yio shook her head bitterly, "Tyr is alive."

Kru's red and brown eyes wavered and Yio stepped passed the sword, looking down at the map, "Sarin has gone to deal with him. If Drak'tur interferes, she won't succeed."

The Fae sighed, allowing her sword to dissipate, "They're dead, Yio. All of them."

"I know." Yio replied, "I saw Wintry, and Kyrus. I doubt Alfiti would have lived long beyond his death. They were doomed the moment Wintry died. The moment Tyr shoved me outside the damned timestream."

Kru shook her head, "You don't get it. Without them, this war is over. I can't win it. You can't."

"I wouldn't count on it." Yio replied, "I can see the possibilities, Kru. I know it looks like there's no chance. But I can see the timelines again. That wasn't supposed to happen. It'll take the 'verse a while to catch up with it."

The Fae glared at her, "Wait. You can see them... You're mortal. How?"

"I'm fully mortal." Yio smiled at her, "And now, I'm fully Fate again. Sarin is breaking the rules. Because Wintry died. Because the death of the one who stole magic from the gods shouldn't be so easily forgotten. The gods have denied Wintry resurrection or ascension. They want to forget the one who made the world what it is. That's a greater sin than any we can commit."

Kru smiled weakly, "So now you're going to break the rules as well."

Yio shrugged, "Sort of. Not really. I can tell you anything you want. I will help you end this war, Kru. What I can't tell you is what breaking a rule will actually do. All actions have consequences. But unforeseen consequences have... They ripple. They move back and forth and sideways in time. It takes a while for time to fall out of that kind of flux. For it to be clear what the results are, and by the time that happens, they've become fixed events. It's complicated, but that's the overview."

Kru frowned, "So basically, if you break the rules, you become mortal."

"I already am." Yio growled, "I'm not a Fate anymore, Kru. I gave that up to come save your ass. I sacrificed my eternity for a single lifetime. No afterlife for someone like me. When I'm dead, I'm over. I cease to be. I have given up more than you are capable of understanding, little Fae. Even this stupid war that threatens all of reality isn't the biggest thing I have ever witnessed. In terms of scale, things like this come around every thousand years or so, but I never had an age before. I've seen them all. And now, I'll never be there to avert one again."

Kru sighed, looking at her with distaste.

Yio smiled tightly, "Now, to beat Drak'tur, we need to cut Alphege's fate. Break her off from Trei."

Kru rolled her eyes, "Can't be done. Not even by you. So we'll kill her."

"Can be done." Yio replied, smiling, "In fact, it's precisely what we need to do, if we're going to win this war. Because it hasn't been done, ever. Not in any future."

Kru scratched her head, "So... It can't be done."

Yio laughed, "Not without breaking the rules."

The Fae looked at her in surprise, and Yio shrugged, "Now, choose who you're bringing with you to defend me whilst I rip a tiny, minuscule hole in reality."

Kru sighed, "Why would I ever help you, Yio? You're a Fate. You're a manipulator."

"Well, Deslin is too." Yio replied, "I mean, he's a servant of Drak'tur, but you don't seem to mind having a traitor waiting on you."

The Fae went pale, "Deslin? The elf I saved? He was just a knight. An apprentice Guardian."

"He was Drak'tur's spy." Yio sighed, "That's why Alfiti sent him to you. She figured you'd actually kill him. She didn't know who he was spying for, mind you. Just that he wasn't a guardian. Couldn't be permitted to be. Did you know Deslin is scouting the palace? That he evolved an ork to do it?"

"No."

Yio shrugged, "Well. That's something."

Kru put her hands on the map table slowly, trying to calm her breathing, "It's obvious, in retrospect. Deslin would do anything for power. To get stronger. The same addictions that come with the Fel."

Yio sighed, "Yeah. There's something else, too."

The Fae glared up at her, "What bloody explosion is next?"

"We need an ork's help."

Kru winced, "I'm assuming you mean one I don't control. And won't be allowed to control."

"Mo'ktar." Yio replied, "He's doubting the divinity of his lord. Because you exist."

The Fae rubbed her face, "That makes sense. He'd make a decent ruler for the orks, then. Probably. We can't afford a power vacuum."

"There will still be civil war." Yio replied, "But he might just be the thing they need, to get enough stability to get a truce."

Kru looked at the map in front of her, “They control over half of Eldrasa. A truce doesn’t mean much.”

“They’ve also invaded Kruin.”

The Fae winced, “I know. I’ve got a gateway there, myself. I’ve started evacuating some of the farmers here. It isn’t much, but it’s what I can do.”

“A truce has negotiations.” Yio said slowly, “We give them Eldrasa, they give us back the places they can’t take... Yet.”

Kru shrugged, “Even if we do get peace, it won’t last.”

“It’ll give you time to build an army.” Yio insisted, “Look at you. Four days? In four days you managed to match an invasion force, or at least become annoying enough they want to hunt you down and eat you.”

The Fae nodded, her wings drooping, “So. This is why I had to have the Fel. To be a deterrent.”

“No.” Yio replied, “You became a Dark Fae, because you wanted to be. The ’verse would have put you in this position of power whatever you chose. You decided to be the depressed and angry bitch. The world just went along with you.”

Kru glared up at her angrily, the air filling with Fel for a moment. Yio waved it away from her face calmly.

The Fae collapsed onto a seat nearby, “What do you mean, Yio?”

“You and I running into each other wasn’t my idea.” She replied, “It wasn’t totally Kao either. A bit of it was you. Who you are. Who you are becoming. Power gravitates towards you, Kru. You’re the reason that Drak’tur noticed Eldrasa was weak enough to attack. He hadn’t thought about here in years. But because you were here, his thoughts were drawn here. It isn’t a conscious thing. It’s why he decided to be part of your torture, personally. Despite not having sullied his hands in years. His mastery of the Fel was passed to you, because you witnessed it. You witnessed it because you believed you could control it already.”

Kru shook her head, “I am not getting it.”

“You’re a goddess.” Yio snapped.

The Fae stared at her, eyes wide, “What?”

Yio winced, “Breaking my own couple hundred rules. Damn it. Look, Kru. Trei was just the first of a new line of gods. A new dynasty. The powers of the old gods are leaving them, and the power has to go somewhere. For some, the power won’t find anything acceptable, and will create itself a new body and mind and soul. Like Trei. He’s new. No one has seen anything like him before. But, for other gods, the power will find a soul in the worlds that is compatible. The power will slowly be taken from one, and given to the other. That’s you. You’re not nearly at your full strength, but you are divine.”

The Fae swallowed nervously, “So my will is shaping the world.”

“Your mere presence shapes the world.” Yio replied, “Your will is just the icing on the cake. The world will do anything it can not to kill you. It needs you. Doesn’t mean you can’t die. If you had allies in other gods, they’d resurrect you... But you don’t. There’s only you and Trei so far, and well... The old gods aren’t exactly happy with the situation. They’d rather kill you both.”

Kru smiled slowly, “I have died. I saw him.”

Yio nodded, “Oh, I know. I killed you the first time it happened, remember?”

Kru glared, “Wait. You knew it would happen, didn’t you?”

“It was...” Yio searched for the right words, “An introduction. I knew he would notice you. So I dragged you in front of him. I didn’t know what he’d do with that information, but knowing him, he would be kind.”

Kru shook her head, “He has been kind. He’s brought me back, more than once. I’m only here because of him. I don’t understand how, but he always convinced me to keep living. To keep fighting. I just didn’t know why. I thought he must be using me.”

Yio shrugged, “In a way, he is. You’re like him. Protecting you, protects him. But I doubt he sees it that way.”

Kru nodded slowly, “So. What are my goddess powers like?”

“Angry. Hateful.” Yio shrugged, “An extension of you. That’s all.”

Kru frowned, “So... Where are my powers coming from? What god have I pissed off and have to watch out for?”

“Kao’s not pissed.” Yio replied with a laugh, “She’s been trying to help you.”

The Fae stood up slowly, “We have a chance, don’t we?”

“A small one.” Yio replied and shrugged, “Too small to actually see.”

“Let’s go get Mo’ktar.”

Sarin

He didn't turn around as she entered the hall. The Fae with black wings, and black eyes. He just stood there, standing over the prone body the elfin woman, sapping her strength, and bleeding off the power connected to her. He didn't say anything at her approach, but she knew he knew it was her, all the same.

Sarin put a hand on his shoulder, as he ignored her.

The pink-haired woman smiled at him, "You know, you could have done it. Become a god like you wanted. All you had to do was ask. Trei would have welcomed you in, as a brother. As someone who understood what he had been through. Instead, you asked to die. To be forgotten."

The Fae shrugged, "You didn't let me sleep, though, did you?"

"A mistake."

He smiled at her, "Too late to take that one back."

"Not really." Sarin replied.

Tyr turned to her, ready to strike her down.

Vastras had been correct.

She had created a weapon that would eventually destroy the gods. It was inevitable. But perhaps it wasn't the worst thing in the world. Perhaps he could be the first creation of a new world. A world where no one needed gods or heroes. Where massacres were the exception, rather than the rule. A world where war had become obsolete, and all peoples could become equal.

There was opportunity there.

Risk as well.

She would tip the balance, she could not allow this opportunity pass her by.

She looked at herself, and then slapped her. "Do not resurrect, Tyr, you utter idiot. Trei is the exception to the rule. Let things happen as they do."

The timelines contorted, screeching violently as Tyr was yanked out of them.

She looked at the man standing beside her, holding the power of a god. Defiant, even in the end of things.

Tyr flinched, "What have you done? You can't rewrite history!"

"Been there, done that." Sarin replied, smiling. "You lost, Tyr. Again. Because you will always lose. You're nothing but a shadow. You belong in the past, in our memories, not our hearts."

The Fae grabbed her, screaming.

Except she wasn't there anymore, she was skating over the timelines, repairing the holes as they appeared. She replaced Tyr's actions with her own. Opening the doorway for Yio to do what needed to be done.

She just hoped her sister would have the guts to be the heir of Wintry.

Kru

“Wait!” She screamed angrily as the ork went to attack again, and she held up a handful of Fel. “Please. Just listen.”

The ork was shoved aside by a bigger one, who walked up to her, glaring through brilliant red eyes at her, “Speak, Fae.”

“I’m the one the traitors serve.” She replied, “Not by choice, but by my power.”

The ork shrugged, “You aren’t making me want to not killy you.”

“I shouldn’t be able to.” Kru growled, “Think for once in your stupid pig life! How in the hells can I control the Fel, if Drak’tur doesn’t want me to? Either he wants a civil war to wipe out you and yours, or I’m his equal and he can’t stop me. Neither are what he has told you. Has raised you to believe.”

The ork sighed heavily, “What of it? I serve Drak’tur. I will not bring him harm.”

“You serve orkind.” Yio said, yawning where she stood next to a tree, an axe embedded just above her head, whilst an ork writhed in pain in front of her, holding his groin. “That is more important that a liar.”

He glared at her, “I do not care to hear you, pink one. Your death is my command. I will make it so.”

Kru glared at her, “You did not tell me he was this stupid.”

Yio shrugged, “What are you going to do? Orks are raised in a cult.”

Kru clenched her fists and turned, “Fine. You say you serve Drak’tur, totally and completely. So you trust him.”

“He is our truth.”

Kru smiled, “Fel is truth, not him. Fel is survival.”

The ork blinked in surprise, “You know some of what we know.”

“I know Fel.” She replied, and slammed her strength into him, burying his will beneath hers. He drowned in the power that washed over him, falling onto his knees in front of her.

Kru released the power, and the ork shook his head.

He stumbled upright slowly, holding up a hand to stop his unit, and looked at her, “You released me. Is this your mistake?”

“No.” Kru replied, “The Fel is slavery, ork. Slavery to Drak’tur, or slavery to me, but slavery all the same.”

He nodded, “Yes.”

Yio stepped over the ork still holding his parts, “So. What do you say, Mo’ktar? Do you want to be free?”

The ork’s eyes widened, “Wait. You didn’t just infect me, Fae. What have you done?”

She smiled at him, her eyes bright, “I cleansed you. You’re not infected by the Fel anymore, ork. You can choose what you’re going to do. I’d rather it wasn’t to kill me, obviously. But I can’t change your mind if it is.”

He waved a hand, “You’ll just infect me again. Make me bow.”

"I can't." Kru shrugged, "You're immune, now."

The ork stumbled in shock, and turned to look at the others. She thoughts and memories flickering in the Fel from the others. He was a mystery. His thoughts were guarded, so she couldn't read them. He was cut off from the Fel, so she couldn't see through his eyes anymore. Yet she could see what the others were thinking. Remembering. Orkish children, killed for being born free of the Fel.

Killed for being immune.

It wasn't something they'd been allowed to think. She could already see shamen reaching out to the unit, to pluck out the forbidden thoughts. She blocked their way. She needed these orks to think for themselves. To understand just how much Drak'tur had been manipulating them. How much he feared them, despite being their creator. Their god. He didn't take their worship blindly. Where they gave faith and trust, he gave nothing but blind obedience.

Mo'ktar looked at his hands, "My skin."

Yio stepped over, brushing his arm, knocking aside the blackness and revealing a deep brown underneath, "You aren't infected anymore, ork. You're hardly going to be a Fel beast anymore. You're what an ork was supposed to be. Before he became a tool of his own madness, Drak'tur wanted to create a people. A free people. Free of the prejudices he faced everywhere else. He was a genius. He invented the Fel, so he could become as powerful as a god. That is nothing short of miraculous. But it came with a cost."

Mo'ktar nodded hesitantly, brushing the Fel from his skin, revealing an ork as it was supposed to be. "He became what the Fel wished him to be."

"The Fel is mindless." Kru replied, "A river of hatred and anger. It never ceases, never abates. All it wants is for everything else to join the Fel. There is no mind to it, no grand plan. Nothing but an overwhelming desire. A desire that took the brilliant man who made you... And made him into this pathetic, sick creature. It really is pathetic. It robbed him of his greatest strength. His genius."

The ork nodded, and turned, "Free them. Each will consider your request. We will be free. We will choose."

Yio shrugged, "Should have seen that coming, Kru."

The Fae sighed. "And if they attack?"

The ork sighed, "If they attack, I will kill them. If they flee, none shall touch them. Agreed?"

Kru nodded.

She reached into the Fel.

Mo'ktar

Freedom. It was a word he'd thought he understood. A word he thought he had owned.

There was nothing to describe what actually having freedom felt like. The changes it brought with it. There was no more clamouring of voices inside his skull. He was alone, separated from his family, his people. He didn't have the guidance to lean on, nor their desire to fall back against.

Yet, all the same, he did not desire it.

Not if it meant giving up what he now had. His thoughts spiralled freely on their own. They were locked to his mission or quest. They didn't rewrite themselves. His memories weren't filling with holes. This was heresy. Usually the others would correct him, redirect him, and he would remain the loyal soldier. Yet now, free of that, for the first time he was able to question why he was serving Drak'tur.

He didn't have a good answer.

The man was a miserable, cruel bastard that had inflicted damage to all orkind for generations. He didn't see their lives as a cost. He showed irritation when he had to replenish the ranks because he had killed too many of them in countless attacks against a well-prepared and well-armed enemy. Orks marched faithfully, to their deaths, and the man sat back and ignored them, turning his attention to something else. He knew they would die, but he simply didn't care. Their lives were expendable.

The Fel didn't just allow his thoughts to be manipulated. It strangled what an ork was. His mind felt clear for the first time in his life. His skin wasn't as dark as pitch like he'd always thought. It was a soft brown, covered in tiny hairs he'd never seen. The Fel had acted like an armour, but he was glad to be free of it. The face he saw reflected in the watering hole wasn't one he recognised.

The red eyes were gone, replaced with a brilliant green. He could see the scars clearly on his face, scars he thought had healed a long time ago. Scars that had only been hidden by the Fel. It didn't make them invincible, but it made them believe it. Like everything else, the Fel lied. It lied when it gave them power to overcome any and all of their enemies. It gave them the power to die. It took away their fear, made them reckless. Good for foot soldiers, useless for war.

And Drak'tur himself was shrouded in the Fel.

Mo'ktar glanced over at the woman who had freed him. She, too, was hidden in the Fel. Blind to what it was doing to her, how it was taking away everything that made her who she was. How it was stealing her soul in exchange for power. The Fel was a sickness. It took what made you an individual, and stripped it away. The result was nothing but sound and fury. It meant nothing. All the Fel desired was the spread of itself.

That wasn't something that Mo'ktar wanted anymore.

The pink-haired creature sat down next to him, "Some of the others have left. I think a couple are headed back to Drak'tur."

He nodded grimly. It wasn't something unexpected. Freedom came with fear, something he had never felt in his life.

"Kru won't touch them." The woman continued, "She'll honour the agreement. But I don't think he will be as generous."

That was obvious. Fel-less children were executed at birth. Discard the weak, honour the strong. That was the mantra they had been taught, the lie that had been forced upon them. A

culture of hatred of what they actually were.

She sighed, looking at him, "Your thoughts are dark. I'm talking here, why not join me?"

He smiled at her, "You are insistent, creature."

She flicked her hair sideways, "Tch. You don't even know what I was, do you? I'm mortal now. But before I was mortal, this hair, and these ears, indicated my species. Do you know them... At all? Or did he wipe us from your memories?"

The ork sighed heavily, "I do not know you. You say you are mortal. Were you not, before?"

"I was not." She said with a laugh, "I was born very close to the beginning of all creation, ork. Before time began. Because... Time was one of my creations. My name is Yio. I was one of the three Fates who governed destiny throughout the timelines, and throughout all worlds. Even yours."

He stared openly at her, "You're being serious."

"Yes." She glared, "I was a celestial. I gave it up to help end this war."

He shook his head slowly, "It is... Difficult. I cannot hope to understand you... Yio."

She blinked, "Why not? You've tasted freedom now. You might understand why I want to preserve it."

"Not that part." He smiled slowly, "You say you were born before time began. I was born eight years ago. I am very nearly an elder."

Yio scratched the back of her head, "Orks... Oh that's right. Average lifespan of twelve, if they don't get killed in battle first. Sexually mature at three. Mentally mature at one and a half. You live... Accelerated lives, compared to most species."

Mo'ktar raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean by that?"

"Kru over there." Yio gestured, "She's Fae. That means when she gets old and dies, she gets reborn. After a decade or so, she regains the memories of her past lives. Takes practice. But, in just this life... She's... Kru! How old are you, this time?"

The Fae looked over tiredly, "Eh... Two hundred and seven."

She turned back to the battle plans she was trying to map out on the table, and Mo'ktar felt his throat tighten nervously, "She is not speaking in days, is she?"

"No." Yio laughed, "As for elfin... You do know they don't die of old age, right?"

Mo'ktar shook his head, "It was not necessary for us to know."

"Kind of is." Yio responded, "How else could you know how experienced a warrior an elf was? Deslin over there. He's a young one. Only about a thousand."

The ork felt himself go pale, and he looked carefully at her, "You are older than eternity. The elf is a... Orks don't have a number large enough."

"Millenium." Yio smiled, "That's a thousand years."

He shook his head, "And the youngest, is this Fae? Over two hundred years old."

"This lifetime." Yio replied, "She's older than Deslin. She remembers each life, even if she was different in each."

Mo'ktar scratched the back of his head, "Why are orks so shortlived? Are we just dead in the blink of an eye? Are others like us? The humans?"

“Humans generally live to about sixty years.” Yio shrugged, “That’s improving, as they discover more and more medicines. Orks die young, Mo’ktar. They weren’t meant to be so shortlived. It isn’t an inherent weakness of your species.”

He looked down at his reflection in the water, “The Fel. It exchanges the power from somewhere, doesn’t it?”

“It drains the magic from your own connection to the lifestream.” Yio whispered, “I was hoping not to say that. Not yet.”

He laughed, “I am not so easily rattled, Yio. I expect to die in battle, soon.”

“You don’t have to.” Yio shrugged, “You have free orks here. For the first time in too long. I could take you somewhere else. Another realm. Let you start over.”

“No.” Mo’ktar sighed, “Freedom comes with responsibility. I would rather the last hope of my people die fighting for a chance to free us all, than to hide away and create our lives afresh. We are still a warlike people.”

Yio smiled, “Of course. But now you have your honour, as well as your bloodlust.”

The ork glared at her, “Are you peeking inside my mind, again?”

“Nope.” Yio yawned, “Can’t do that. Your thoughts are blind to me. I find it really weird, if I’m honest.”

He looked up at the sky, “I do not have a word for this. My understanding of the common tongue is... Weak. The sky. The light. The calm.”

Yio leaned back, “Beauty. Something that has to be seen to be appreciated.”

“The sky has beauty.” He replied, smiling. “I never noticed.”

“You two done?” Kru growled with irritation, “We do have a fight to plan.”

Yio rolled her eyes, “I thought I’d just wing it. Seems to go better that way.”

Kru flew in front of them, her hazel and red-flecked eyes glaring at the both of them, “Do you share this sentiment, Mo’ktar?”

He shrugged, “I do not know how to fight without the Fel, Fae. It will be a new experience for all orks. Our planning will not aide you, because we do not have the strategies to fight without constant communication. It might be best to learn as we go.”

Her wings buzzed with irritation and Yio held up a hand, “Kru. They aren’t veteran soldiers anymore. So we need to adapt our strategy to fit them. Put them in a position where they can use their combat experience, but don’t need vast planning. That’ll fall apart.”

The Fae settled beside them, sitting and pouting, “What then?”

Mo’ktar considered, “We need to take away that same advantage from our enemy. That close to Drak’tur... You won’t be able to take the Fel would you?”

“No.” Kru stated, “Probably not. Not whilst he’s connected to Trei.”

Yio smiled slowly, “Then we take away the numbers advantage. Funnel the orks into a narrow opening, easily defended. A small number of defenders can fight against a large number of attackers.”

“We’re the ones attacking.” Kru snapped.

Yio yawned, “Not necessarily. I could move the lot of us inside the palace hall where Alphege is. Then you and the orks can defend me, whilst I try and dig Drak’tur out of her.”

Mo'ktar frowned, "That is not the building. It was destroyed in the initial fight. The lord... Drak'tur... Moved the elf deep into the catacombs beneath the palace. An easy place to defend, but with a dozen openings."

Yio looked over at Kru, "Got a map of the catacombs?"

"No." She snapped, still pouting.

Mo'ktar frowned, and began drawing in the mud next to him, "The layout is extensive, but these set of passages are the fastest way there. The elf lies here, surrounded by an honour guard. You say this creature supplies power to... Drak'tur?"

Yio blinked, "Oh. Didn't we explain that? Uh... Trei is a new god. He was human. Then he was dead. Now he's... More than anyone. Alphege was one of several women who got their fates tangled up with his. He married one of them, and is now the King of the Fae."

Mo'ktar glared at her, "A new... God. That is... Heresy beyond heresy. How could one ascend?"

"Ascension has happened throughout history." Yio laughed, "Even Drak'tur is slated to ascend when he finally dies. Wrodin wants him. Trei is new, though. He's ascending of his own merit. He was created by the most powerful mage in human history, to become a god, or something like it. It's a complicated thing."

The ork breathed out slowly, "How can I trust this, Yio? You said you were once a Fate. Can that be proven?"

She blew her hair up with irritation, "There are rules that govern the celestials. Breaking them would cause problems, so I can't mess with the timeline. I might be able to let you observe it. A piece of your past. An alternate timeline, with what could have been. That sort of thing. Probably not the future."

Mo'ktar looked at her in surprise, "Show me my birth, then."

Yio looked at him in confusion, and then turned and ripped the air open in front of him as if it were nothing. The ork watched in wonder as the leather sack hanging from the tree was torn open, by the priest with the ceremonial knife. The child fell to the ground crying, and the priest picked him up. Fel poured from one mouth to the other, and the baby stopped crying. Began shaking, and foaming at the mouth. There was a moment, and then the white skin turned slowly black. The priest smiled, and then tossed the child to the ground, moving to the next.

Mo'ktar felt himself go pale, "That's enough. Those rites are protected. The spell... We should not have been able to see that."

Yio dismissed the portal, "The spell? Oh. You mean that warding spell. Yeah. That wouldn't work against me anyway. It isn't strong enough."

The ork glanced at her in surprise, "That spell is incredibly powerful."

Yio shrugged, "Yeah, so it has an incredible weakness. The caster has to be stronger than the person trying to view beyond it."

Mo'ktar laughed softly, and then glanced at the Fae beside him, "Is she bluffing?"

"Yio is still as powerful as I am." Kru replied bitterly, "Despite my gaining the Fel, and the other crap that's supposedly happening to me. And she's a thousand times weaker than when she was a Fate."

He considered the two carefully, and then sighed, "So now, I am the weak one."

Yio elbowed him playfully, "Oh grow up, ork. We're the exception, rather than the rule. The 'verse is full of surprising things. Power isn't one of them. There's always going to be someone stronger than you think. Always going to be someone smarter than you. The point isn't to fight it, but to learn to live with it. You don't have to think of me as a potential enemy to be defeated. Make me your friend, and my power becomes yours."

Mo'ktar raised an eyebrow, "What is... Friend?"

Yio scratched her head and Kru sighed, "Shield-brethrin, might be the closest you have to it. Someone willing to fight and die at your side, but someone you also meet off the field of battle. To drink and feast with. Someone who you listen to, whose advice matters. Someone who you don't necessarily have to do anything with, but you want to be with all the same."

He smiled. He liked that sentiment. Perhaps orks could have friends. Perhaps this was how the other races filled the gap of having the whole race in your head. All of them speaking and advising.

Yio stood up slowly, "Well, I guess we'd better go. We have a battle to fight. I'll just check the way into the catacombs. Get your people ready for the dark."

She vanished without sound or sight, and Mo'ktar stood up, "A strange way of travelling."

"A trick of the Fates." Kru complained, "They don't teach it to anyone. She's right. She'll pull us straight into the dark. We need to adjust our vision for it. Call your people over, I'll shroud us."

Cluuth

She moved silently over the top of the rapport, avoiding the elfin guards patrolling below her. Few of the guards thought to look up. She didn't blame them, it had taken an effort to rise high enough to avoid the sentries, before dropping directly overhead.

It was a hole in their security, but a small one.

She had just been sent to gather intelligence, but she felt like Deslin might be expecting more than that. Wanting more than that. If it were possible, she would take the body of Alphege, and return it to him. If not, she would be able to tell him exactly where it was.

She slipped over the edge of a balcony, and opened the window easily, dropping quietly into the room below. She had been surprised when she found the hall intact, a hall that she was certain that Kru had destroyed, yet here it was. A room of alchemy, and a tabletop in the center of which, where an elfin body lay.

Why did Kru lie about that? What reason did she have?

"She's not an ork."

Cluuth, spun, hands at the read, but she saw nothing.

"Has it been so long you've forgotten the Fel is mine? That you have forgotten my voice?"

Cluuth felt a cold sweat spring up on her neck, and she ran towards the body. She would kill the woman, and succeed in her mission. Yet the floor seemed to stretch out beneath her, the ground to rebel at her movements. She collapsed, sweating, staring at the stone slab where the body lay, just out of reach.

The darkness gathered in front of her, revealing an ork slowly, who sat down against the slab, "What have you let them do to you, Cluuth? You were a proud ork once. A proud warrior of our noble race."

"I've evolved." She growled.

Drak'tur smiled kindly at her, like an old father, "If I thought the orks needed to evolve, don't you think that I would been the first to manifest changes? You were perfect as you were. Whilst you have gained abilities, you have lost what it means to be an ork. You felt fear at my presence. The presence of your creator. I will not harm you, as I harm none of our kind. Yet, you felt fear. Something no ork should ever feel. I took that away."

She glared down at her hands, suddenly feeling uncertain. He was right. She felt fear. It was wrong. That was not what it meant to be an ork. "You lied about the Fel."

"That woman?" Drak'tur yawned, "She can play with the Fel, let it corrupt her. Let it take her heart. She will join us as a lich, in time. I've done this before. When great mages rise up, I give them the temptation, and they take it. In time, they become nothing more than one us. Many of them have used the Fel to attack us, before realising the truth. Before welcoming the Fel to guide their lives."

That was also true. He had done it this way, since the very beginning. Letting Kru have a handful of orks under her influence was not unusual. All he was doing was finding the least violent way to welcome a powerful warrior into the fold. In the end, she would serve the lord.

Cluuth felt her hands clench up angrily, "She wasn't the one who evolved me."

"The elf." He replied calmly, "The elf knows the Fel well, though he does tend to overstep his

bounds. I asked him to send me one who knew the movements of the enemy, not to turn her into a freak, an abomination.”

Cluuth looked up at him, her eyes glistening, “The elf is yours?”

“Of course.” Drak’tur replied, “He was the spy who pulled the barrier down so we could invade. I’ve promised him a prominent position within our people. He will be a champion.”

She cringed, “He was the one who did this to me.”

“He overstepped.” The warlord nodded, “So, I guess it falls to either me or you to correct that mistake. Prove that you are still an ork. Prove you value our people above all else.”

Yio

She appeared in the dark and cold. The air was damp here, musty with age and mold. She covered her mouth and crouched down beside the wall as she waited for her vision to adapt. She kept as silent as she could, listening to the sounds moving through the cave system. The world was always so noisy in the dark, in the underground. She could hear water dripping, the wind howling as it moved from passage to passage.

There was breathing somewhere, close. It was quiet, as if the person was trying not to be heard. She couldn't tell how close, not in an echo-filled underground cavern. It wasn't her own breathing either. She blinked, as she began to make out the shapes in the shadows. Across from her, lying against the wall, was an ork. It wasn't breathing, it was dead. The light had gone out from the eyes.

Yio reached behind her, tying her hair up in a bun, to prevent it scraping across the wall and revealing where she was. She turned her head slowly, straining to see the shapes in the dark. She found what she was looking for nearby. A crouched figure, with soft blue eyes, staring straight at her.

She smiled slowly, but the figure shook their head, pressing a finger to their lips.

The other orks. Yio frowned and traced words in the air, letting them linger for a moment before they disappeared. "I'll be right back."

She vanished, slamming her eyes shut as she appeared next to the lake. She felt Kru put a hand on her shoulder, "We're ready."

Yio grinned, "Alphege is awake. At least one guard is down."

There was a sound of surprise from the others, and then Yio held up her hand, "Everyone, hold on."

They reappeared in the tunnel with a crash of steel, and Yio opened her eyes, standing up, and stretching as Kru and the orks spread out. She walked over to Alphege, smiling down at her, "Been a while."

The elf's ears flattened against her head, "Orks? You brought orks to rescue me?"

"Free orks." Mo'ktar growled over his shoulder, bracing as they heard footsteps running through the cave system.

Alphege glared at Yio, "You've been interfering again."

"Kinda." Yio shrugged, "Kinda not. I'm mortal now."

The elf blinked, "What? Why would you... Did Trei?"

"No." Yio sighed, holding up her wrist and flicking the thread of fate, "Still no idea how to break this thing. Still crazy about him. Haven't heard from him at all since he resurrected me. Didn't even talk to me at the wedding."

Alphege sighed heavily, "He did not speak to me either. Perhaps he thought it would help."

"He made us guests of honour." Yio complained as she heard the crash of steel and the roar of orks behind her, "I mean, how rude can you get?"

Something squealed as it died.

Alphege rolled her eyes, "He is without wit. Sometimes I wonder how someone managed to cram that much idiot into that skull of his."

Kru snapped angrily, “Are you two going to stand there and gossip, or are you going to help?!”

Alphege laughed, “Ah, so we have got a stand-in for the Lady Luna, do we?”

Yio shrugged, turning, “I guess so. This is Kru, of the Kruei. She’s... Like Trei.”

The elf’s ears flattened again, staring, “Holy hellfires. You speak the truth. Does she know?”

“Yes! I know!” Kru growled, spinning as an ork tried to charge through her. She broke it’s neck and glared, “There’s plenty to go around. Are you going to help or not?”

Alphege frowned and shrugged, “I do not have my spear. I will not be of great benefit without it.”

Yio yawned, “Meh. These guys are boring. All rage, no strength.”

Kru yelled in frustration and turned to fight again.

The elf smiled at her, “You know, she’s will lose her calm and make us the focus, eventually.”

Yio felt so at home, speaking with the elf after all this time. Her radiant outer personality, and her inner squealing little girl. The dichotomy of the last Guardian of the Shrine of Eldrasa. There was one more aspect to be revealed however. The warrior spirit that allowed her to be the one who took down Summer, when no one else could.

The warrior who was taken down only by a blood-crazed Fae. Who made a fight of it despite fighting a Faen beserker.

Yio held out her hand and the Spear of Algar slapped into it noisily.

Alphege’s face fell as she saw it, “You shouldn’t have been able to do that. Not to summon it.”

“Algar can be summoned any time there is need of it.” Yio tried to side-step the question awkwardly.

Alphege grabbed it from her hand and her jaw tightened, her muscles began flexing all over her body. Her ears pulled all the way back and she let out a soft growl. “My child is dead.”

“Alfiti isn’t lost yet.” Yio tried to reassure her, but the woman was no longer listening.

Yio stepped back in shock, staring as the red thread fell from her wrist, trailing onto the ground before vanishing. Alphege was released from Trei. Her soul was screaming. She had no place for love in her heart anymore.

Not with the rage that had replaced it.

Yio spun, “Get out of her way!”

Kru

She shot to the side as the elf blitzed through the air, igniting it behind her. The Fae waved the flames away, wincing as she saw a half dozen orks drop to the ground before they'd even comprehended that a new attacker was charging them.

The spear moved gracefully, perfectly. Blood sprayed the air. Intestines adorned the floor. The red liquid sprayed and poured, trailing slowly across the floor, running down the floor of the cave. It was over, faster than she could believe it.

The orks never stood a chance. Not against that.

Her aura was worse than any Kru had seen, and that included her own. The hatred boiling up in the elf was worse than the Fel itself. The undying rage there.

She swallowed nervously, touching down on a dry patch of floor, watching the heavy-breathing elf uncertainly and Yio stepped in behind her, "She realised Alfiti is dead."

A mother had lost her daughter.

Kru waved Mo'ktar over, "Stay behind the elf, and out of her way."

The ork frowned, "If she is here, is he vulnerable, now?"

"Yes." Kru whispered, "But so are we. To her. Just... Be careful."

He smiled, "I know that look on her face. I have worn it."

Kru shook her head, "Not like this, you haven't."

She gestured, "That way out, Yio?"

Alphege took off with a sprint and the Fae winced. She didn't envy those the elf would encounter. It wouldn't matter if her own people were about to stop her. Not if it meant getting to the one who had caused the death of her child.

Sarin

“So.” She said slowly, looking at the man in a cloak standing at the edge of infinity, “You came. I guess that means you’re more involved than I thought.”

The god turned slowly, shifting reality so that he was facing her, “You broke the rules, Sarin. You gave power to your sister. Such favouritism does not belong in ones such as us. We should be above these petty actions.”

“We should.” Sarin glared, “So why did you give power to Drak’tur? Why did you teach him how to drain the power of a god?”

Wrodin raised an eyebrow at her, “I have broken no rules. You have. It is your head that will go before the others.”

The goddess crossed her arms, “So I’m right then. It was a bit of a guess, but even someone like Drak’tur requires inspiration. He created the orks and then never changed them, never even tried to improve them. Just fell lower and lower into his insane obsession with corruption magic. Until you came along, whispering in his dreams.”

Wrodin drew his sword, “I would prepare myself if I were you, Fate.”

She rolled her eyes, “You may be the god of war, Wrodin. But I am the embodiment of destiny. I am not destined to fall by your hands.”

“We’re gods.” He sneered, “We make our own path.”

Mo'ktar

The ork burst out of the underground, into the palace. He visibly flinched at the chaos he found there. The blood coated the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Organs he barely recognised were smeared across every single surface.

It wasn't just orks lying dead here either. He recognised the shapes of some of the skulls. The were elfin. Elfin who dared to stand in the way of a rampaging woman who been their guardian.

They never stood a chance.

He moved slowly down the hall, his hammer in his hands. It wasn't much. It wasn't a weapon that would protect him if this elf decided he was her enemy, but she was not the only threat in this place. She would only have killed those that got in her way. He hoped the others knew to run, but there was no telling what a coward was willing to do.

He entered the main chamber, and there he saw it.

He lost all hope of ever being a true warrior. They were warriors. He was a child playing with sticks. He did not grasp battle, but they reveled in it. Whilst he could kill tens, maybe hundreds. They would not bother counting. They were world destroyers.

And power able to level entire cities was being exchanged with every blow.

This was the power of Drak'tur, and Alphege.

Yio

She slammed into the room, the floor splintering under her feet from the poorly guess shift.

Yio looked at the magic in the room and barely had a moment to cast a barrier as the rules controlling gravity began to warp, emmanting in waves as the two figures fought. It was happening already. The fight was approaching singularity.

When too much magic, too much power, is concentrated in any one space it begins to distort the rules of reality. Mass and space and time begin to approach infinity, unlocking all the insanity that suggests. A universe contained in a single speck of sand. An unstable universe that could expand and destroy the containing one before the speck even formed in the first place.

That was the power being unleashed. And she really wasn't sure the gods were united enough to stitch reality back together again. Not when everyone let Kao's girlfriend die and then stopped her reviving her.

If the world died here, then it died. The 'verse might be created again one day, but it wouldn't be hers.

Yio needed to turn the tide of this battle.

She needed to stop Drak'tur.

For that, she needed to fix the gravity problem, or she'd be turned into spaghetti of broken bones and radioactive soup before she moved at all. The key was the nature of gravity. The force doesn't exist. It's an illusion, just like time. A side-effect of the shape of the weave and weft of reality. Right now, the carpet was blowing in the breeze. She needed to pull it taught again.

She needed to offset the power of the Fel. The power of corruption and rage. Of hatred. It was the epitomy of selfish power.

She needed cleansing magic. Of a specific frequency.

Yio gasped, staring.

She was too late.

Drak'tur snarled, yanking the broken spear out of the chest of the elf.

Alphege staggered for a moment, before falling to the ground. Struggling for air, as if she couldn't breathe, blood pouring from the gaping hole that had been ripped into her chest.

The ork turned, and grabbed her hair, picking her up.

Yio dismissed her shield, feeling the warp slam into her, shattering her bones and she thrust her hand forward, spilling out an enormous wave of flame. The magic was simple, she couldn't risk anything complex in this environment.

Drak'tur snapped the head from the body, turning and dismissing the wall of fire as if it had never existed.

Kru

A hand flew to her mouth as the pink-haired woman slammed sideways into a wall. Every bone was broken. Half her body was longer than the other. There wasn't a doubt in her mind.

Drak'tur had killed Yio. He'd killed Alphege. Mo'ktar was bleeding out against a wall.

There was no one else for this.

The master of the Fel was more than any of these people. These idiots. The Fel was power. Authority, and strength. The Fel required the will to reshape the 'verse, and the confidence to use that power.

The Fel was hers.

Kru reached out to the master in front of her, seizing his magic. It didn't belong to him anymore. Not since he had dared to try and kill her with it. He didn't deserve this. He fought only to preserve the now, the present. He couldn't see a better world.

That was what the Fel was for. For realising dreams, not preserving the status quo.

She felt something close around her, and a voice growled inside her head, "Who do you think you are? The Fel belongs to me."

He was inside her. Invading her. That's why he hadn't fought her grabbing the Fel. He was infecting her, the same way he'd infected Alphege.

He would regret it.

Mo'ktar

The ork pushed himself up against the wall, leaving a bloody trail. He couldn't breathe, but he wouldn't need to. Not if he was right about this.

The two warriors were just standing there, as the Fel swarmed around Kru. But he could see her face twitching, quietly, weakly.

Drak'tur was doing what he always did. Infect. Corrupt. Destroy, whilst offering promises of power.

The Fel wasn't swarming around and into this remarkable woman.

It was him.

Mo'ktar stumbled forward, his hoofs skittering on the ground, as he moved slowly, weakly towards the female elfin body that the man he had once served without question now possessed.

She was a queen. The queen of these people. She was innocent in all of this. A victim of the hatred that carried in Drak'tur's wake. Of the plague that was his existence.

Kru needed any advantage he could give her.

Mo'ktar grabbed the immobile elfin, where half of Drak'tur still resided. He distracted the warlock.

The body collapsed to the ground, torn in half.

The ork fell beside it, blood pouring out around his tusks.

Yio

The world was dancing in front of her. Light and dark were edges of the same indefinite shapes. There was no colour to the world. That had bled away with her.

It was hard to think. She couldn't breathe unless she focused on it. The moment she stopped, she would stop altogether.

She saw the ork's attempt. Or she thought she did. A big ass shadow ripping something smaller in half. There was only one obvious thing that'd be. An idiot thinking he was helping. Forgetting than Alis would have been fighting against Drak'tur.

The ork erupted, split at every seam. He became a cloud of red mist.

Yio turned her eyes to the red and black dust storm that was Fae, and she knew it. She knew that Drak'tur had won. The body was his.

It wouldn't take the man long to realise that Kru was exactly what he'd been using Alphege for. He didn't need to seep power off a god anymore. He had it now. All of it.

The power to change reality in irreparable ways.

Void. She wished she could move.

Kru

She screamed in anger. Her face contorted in this world that wasn't the world. This box that the bastard had tried to shove her inside, cutting her from what is and what was.

He hadn't just tried.

He'd succeeded. Utterly triumphed. Kru was contained. She was cut off from herself, and she could feel it. Feel her power becoming his. Her connection to the lifestream joining his, and leaving her behind.

It was over.

She was going to die, after handing her enemy everything he could ever dream of. The body of a Fae, and power over the Fel that was unmatched. True power. The touch of a god.

She wondered which god was dying so that this bastard could inherit a power never meant for him.

"Haven't you learned yet?"

Kru turned slowly, seeing the figure, a figure that had always been out of focus for her. He was a man, or something like it.

She could see him.

"So I guess I'm dead then."

He smiled at her, "You've come so close, so many times. You didn't belong then, so why do you think you belong now?"

Kru glared, "I can see you."

"I'm a god." He shrugged, "That comes with rights and responsibilities. One of my responsibilities is to comfort those who cross the threshold between life and death, who become something the world doesn't understand. Death is not an end. There is no binary existence to life or death. That's nothing but an illusion. A simplified form of understanding that doesn't fit a god."

Kru tossed up her hands, "Its over! I failed! Don't you get that? I can't stop him! He has my power now. I can't be a god. I can't even be a decent Fae."

The man nodded, "Exactly. That's why I'm here. Because you don't have the power to be who you need to be. To be who this world needs you to be."

Kru stared at him.

He held out a hand, "All you have to do, is ask."

Yio

She rolled over slowly, looking up as the Fel cloud around Kru settled, almost instantly. As if it had never been fighting her in the first place. It was anticlimactic, the way that Kru dismissed him. Took his soul and stripped it for spare magic.

She pushed herself upright, one arm trailing, and smiled.

There was only one man she knew who could do a thing like that. It was about time that Kru realised she was part of a dynasty, and she wasn't in it alone.

Yio shivered as she touched the last vestiges of the magic that had very nearly become a singularity. She needed to redirect it, disperse it, or it could still destroy reality, or at least punch a hole in it.

Her own healing barely scratched the surface. There was more here than could be safely contained. The safest way would be to remove it altogether. That would require break a rule, but the others might just let her do it, if it meant not having to reweave reality's fabric.

If she was going to break one rule, she might as well break six whilst she was at it.

Kru turned as she heard the gasp, followed by the panicked breathing.

Yio held out a hand, grasping Alis' and pulling her to her feet. "Take it easy, your majesty. You died."

Kru

She glared at Yio. What gave her the right to decide who lived, and who died?

Especially that one.

A useless, stupid elf who endangered the whole of her realm because she didn't know how to watch for threats. Because she'd thought a treaty would stop a power-obsessed madman from using the Fel.

"You have a choice, elf."

Alis looked at her in surprise, "Fae."

"You can step down, or I'll put you back in the grave." Kru stated, "I won't make you a lich or a ghoul. I'll respect that. But the throne isn't yours anymore. You haven't protected this world. I will."

Yio turned to her, "Kru! That's the Fel talking. Not you. You have to let it go."

"It's me talking, mortal." Kru reminded the woman, "The Fel is mine. I took it from the ork, and I will use it to make the world better. I won't become some idiot chasing power for power's sake. I understand it better than he did. I understand it better than you understand me, at any rate. So shut up, before we find out how mortal you really are."

Mo'ktar

Dust filled his lungs, and he coughed violently, spraying the Fel into the air. He groaned, feeling his skin aflame. His eyes burning where they joined to his mind.

His eyes flew open, and he launched to his feet, before collapsing forward onto his hands and knees, vomiting black tar onto the ground. It burned the wood where it landed.

"Easy." A voice soothed him, and he felt the hand of the Fae on his shoulder, "Bringing you back wasn't so easy. I had to work out how to reinfect your stubborn corpse with the Fel. It was impossible, until I tried. Had to... Tweak the 'verse."

Mo'ktar could only groan.

He hated the idea. The idea of rejoining the Fel. To hearing the voices that would strip his will, pretending to be a community whilst serving the will of one. The will of the strongest.

He looked up at Kru, "Did we win?"

"Drak'tur is dead." She replied and shrugged, "Eldrasa is mine. I'd call that a win."

Mo'ktar looked at the Fae, at her darkening skin. Her black wings. The red that now filled her eyes. She was infected with the Fel, through and through. For now, her will dominated it. It wouldn't last. The Fel would never relent, twisting and burrowing, until she became nothing more than a shadow of Drak'tur.

Kru sat him up slowly, "You might have noticed no voices. I didn't just reinfect you. I cured you again. Make sure you don't die, I don't think I can repeat that last miracle."

Mo'ktar nodded slowly, "My people."

Kru considered him, "I could offer it to them, each."

The ork sighed slowly, "What do you want in return?"

"You." She smiled, "I need someone like you. A brave man, a strong man, willing to fight. Willing to die. Whether or not the cause is their own. Whether or not they think it'll even do anything in the end. Someone who will just do what right, because it is the right thing to do."

There was a thought. The right thing to do might be to bury the Fel. To make the 'verse forget it. He couldn't do that, not when Kru felt she needed it. This was a woman who had just killed the most powerful warlock history had ever seen, and then turned around and resurrected someone who should have been long dead.

She had a chance to be something amazing.

Or something worse than the thing she'd killed.

"Free my people, and I will stand at your side." Mo'ktar nodded.

Kru shrugged, "They won't all accept it. Some want the company of the Fel. The clarity of my guidance."

Mo'ktar snorted, and Kru smiled, "Some will. Is that fair? I won't force it on them."

The ork nodded, "I'd expect nothing less from you, my lady."

Kao

She stretched lazily in the bed, beside the fire place, and beside something else that set her alight. She rolled sideways, smiling and brushing a grey strand of hair softly.

The woman blinked tiredly, as if she wasn't understanding.

Kao smiled, "Welcome back."

"Kao'el, baby." Wintry said as if she could scarcely believe it.

She grinned at her, "I told you, you're mine. As if some dumb ork could take you from me."

Wintry winced, "The war... The treaties..."

"Over, for now." Kao smiled, "Both of them. Treaties only apply to celestials, the divine."

Wintry's ears twitched, glaring at her, "What the heck did you do?"

Kao kissed her nose playfully, "Nothing. Kru finished inheriting my power. I'm done. I'm no longer a goddess. I'm eternal still. Timeless, ageless... I still have a decent body and not one form. I still have the power to resurrect whoever I feel like. If if she did bite the dust a while back. But the treaties don't apply. So I can run away with you to the mountains."

Wintry sat up excitedly, "Mountains? Snow?"

Kao grinned at her backside as Wintry stared out the windows, "Where are we?"

"As far away from events as I could get us." Kao replied, "We're safe here, for now. It's just us."

Wintry turned, looking down at her, "Well then. I guess no one can hear us here."

Kao grinned, "No. So you don't need to try and be so quiet."

"Oh, I think that applies more to you." Wintry stuck out her tongue.

Sarin

“You have been found guilty.” One of the others began, “You gave the power to Yio, the power she used to ressurect Alis, extending her life beyond what it should have been. What was supposed to be. The rules were broken.”

Sarin shrugged, “Maybe. But I should never have been put in that position in the first place. I wouldn’t have been, if Wrodin hadn’t broken the treaty first.”

The gods, all hyped up to punish her, suddenly went quiet.

One leaned forward, “You have proof of this?”

“Sure. Wrodin went around inside Drak’tur’s head. Encouraging him, and teaching him what he needed to know to get around the barrier into Eldrasa. That stupid ork would never have worked it out on his own.” Sarin shrugged and pulled a thought out of her pocket, “Too bad for Wrodin, I found the thought. The one he gave to a mortal creature. Divine inspiration.”

Every god present turned, looking at the god of war, who was suddenly looking very nervous.

Sarin frowned, “Can I assume then, that as the framed victim, I get to decide his punishment?”

“Yes.”

She nodded, “Stripped of his powers. Stripped of his immortality, but not killed. Give him to the humans, those mortals. They know war. They could teach him. Teach him how to be what he should have been in the first place. How to become... Better.”

Yio

She played with the grass under her hand idly, her eyes fixed on the small village at the base of the mountain.

She wasn't sure if this was what she wanted, but it was enough.

Yio held up her wrist, looking at the red thread dancing there. Alphege had found a way to be free, right before she died. Free of her love for a man who didn't love her back. Yio wasn't sure that was worth it. She wasn't willing to give up who she was just because there was something in her life that hurt.

It still hurt, knowing who he was. What he was. That he was running around, and didn't care about her at all.

All the same, she was okay with that. It wasn't a burden she couldn't carry. It was such a terrible thing that it distracted her every waking moment. Forgetting about the insane things that Kao had pulled her into, and that she'd never had a choice in the first place, it had worked. Kao had helped her accept who she was. Accept that she loved a man who didn't love her back. There didn't have to be someone for everyone.

Yio looked at the humans meandering in their village, and to the side at the storm approaching. The storm of black dust.

She stood up slowly, drawing her sword.

It wasn't so bad, this mortal life. At least she could do what was worth doing without anyone complaining.

She could stop Kru.

Sequel



Figure 1: Priestess of Ozandius